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Needs and Challenges of Foster Parents

by

Jason Brown

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in

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Abstract

The purpose of the studies was to describe the needs and the challenges of foster parents and their prevalence. Needs of foster parents reported in the literature include training, payment, role clarity, professional recognition, relief, and support. Challenges include: behavioral and emotional problems of foster children, a lack of agency support, unprepared or unsupported loss of a foster child, and finally, dealing with the biological family of the foster child.

Forty-nine parents from 30 foster families were asked to describe their needs in response to the following questions: "What do you need to be a good foster parent?" and "What would make you consider quitting foster parenting?" In response to the first question five themes were apparent: "Good Relationships with Social Workers and Foster Parents," "Cultural Sensitivity," "Family Cohesion," "Support from Social Services," and "Personality Characteristics and Skills." In response to the second question, four themes were apparent: "Problems with the Child Welfare Department," "perception of Low Importance by Others," Safety," and "Stress and Health." Themes were consistent with the literature.

One hundred foster parents were asked to rate their degree of agreement or disagreement with each of the themes generated. Foster parents report having the necessary characteristics and skills to foster, that support from their own families is strong, and that they benefit from the support of other foster parents. Almost one third of those interviewed indicated that they were becoming tired of "fighting on behalf of" their foster children. The major negative influence on their ability to care for foster children is the lack of a positive relationship and support from the children's services system. It is suggested that given the move to regional Child Welfare services in Alberta, the needs and challenges of foster parents need to be addressed by each of the regional boards.

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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

There is a chronic shortage of foster parents in Canada (Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992; Soliday, McCluskey-Fawcett, & Meck, 1994). This shortage has been linked to difficulties with recruitment and retention as well as with placement breakdown (Walter, 1993). Since foster parents themselves are the front line of service delivery, their perceptions of needs and challenges are essential to determine how best to improve the responsiveness of the system to their needs. There is a need for research that can illuminate the qualities that enhance foster parent ability to provide good care, and those that serve as major challenges to their ability to provide care. The identification and promotion of these qualities are key to the prevention of further decreases in the number of available foster home placements.

Considerable research has been conducted into factors that are related to effective foster care (Eastman, 1982; Hazel, 1990; Maclean, 1989). These factors include training, payment, role clarity, professional recognition, relief, and support. As well, there are several challenges that are related to placement breakdown or foster parent turnover (Schwartz, 1994; Simms, 1991; Webb & Aldgate, 1991). Such challenges include: behavioral and emotional problems of foster children, a lack of agency support, unprepared or unsupported loss of foster child, and finally, dealing with the biological family of the foster child.

Statement of the Problem

The needs of foster parents and the challenges they face have been described in previous research. However, no research has utilized the concept mapping method to describe the needs and challenges of foster parents. The concept mapping method provides a means to group the needs and challenges that foster parents report. The results are descriptive concepts that characterize their perceptions.

The purpose of the studies was to describe the needs and the challenges of foster parents and their prevalence. Foster parents were asked to describe their needs and challenges in response to the following questions: "What do you need to be a good foster parent?" and "What would make you consider stopping foster parenting?" Responses to

these questions were subject to thematic analysis and formed the basis of a survey instrument from which frequency data were obtained.

Organization of Dissertation

This dissertation is presented in paper format. Four papers are presented as they have been submitted for publication in peer-reviewed journals. One of the papers (The challenges faced by foster parents: A concept map) has been accepted for publication, while the other three have been submitted, and are currently undergoing review.

The first chapter consists of an introduction and overview to the study. The second chapter is a paper titled "The needs and challenges of foster parents: A review of the literature." The needs reported in the literature include training, payment, role clarity, professional recognition, relief, and support. The challenges reported in the literature include behavioral and emotional problems of foster children, a lack of agency support, unprepared or unsupported loss of a foster child, and dealing with the biological family of the foster child.

The third chapter is a paper titled "The needs of foster parents: A concept map." Forty-nine parents from 30 foster families were asked to describe their needs in response to the following question: "What do you need to be a good foster parent?" Five themes were apparent following the non-parametric statistical analysis: good working relationships with department staff and other foster parents, harmonious and stable relationships with immediate family members, adequate payment for services, and specific personality characteristics.

The fourth chapter is a paper titled "The challenges faced by foster parents: A concept map." Forty-nine individuals from 30 foster families were asked to describe their challenges in response to the following question: "What would make you consider stopping foster parenting?" Responses to this question were subjected to non-parametric statistical thematic analysis. Four themes emerged: working with the department of Child

Welfare and its staff, belief that their work had low value, threats to family and personal safety, and stress-related challenges that could cause thoughts of quitting.

The fifth chapter is a paper titled "The needs and challenges of Alberta foster parents." Participants responded to a telephone survey asking about the needs and challenges they face. The survey consisted of statements gathered by the authors during previous interviews with members of that group of foster parents. One hundred randomly selected foster parents were asked to rate their degree of agreement or disagreement with the statements. They reported having the necessary characteristics and skills to foster, that support from their own families is strong, and that they benefit from the support of other foster parents. What is much less frequent is adequate support from the department of Child Welfare. The major negative influence on their ability to care for foster children is the lack of a positive relationship and support from the children's services system.

The sixth chapter is a brief summary of the results. Practice implications of this research are described. It is suggested that given the move to regional Child Welfare services in Alberta, the needs and challenges of foster parents need to be addressed by each of the regional boards.

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CHAPTER 2 – NEEDS AND CHALLENGES OF FOSTER PARENTS: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Abstract

Considerable research has been conducted into the factors that are associated with good foster parenting. Periodical database searches were conducted on the terms "foster parent," "foster care," and "foster child." A review of the factors found in the literature includes training, payment, role clarity, professional recognition, relief, and support. Several challenges related to placement breakdown or foster parent turnover are also apparent in the literature. Such challenges include: behavioral and emotional problems of foster children, a lack of agency support, unprepared or unsupported loss of a foster child, and finally, dealing with the biological family of the foster child. Addressing these needs and challenges is essential to the ongoing recruitment and retaining of foster parents in Canada.

There are common problems affecting the field of foster care across the provinces and territories in Canada (Kendrick, 1990; Sellick, 1992; Walter, 1993). Numerous reports speak of a chronic shortage of foster parents (Chamberlain, Moreland & Reid, 1992; Martin, Altemeier, Hickson, Davis, & Glascoe, 1992; Soliday, McCluskey-Fawcett & Meck, 1994). Foster care agencies and departments are experiencing difficulties both recruiting and retaining foster parents, and advocates claim that this is due largely due to inadequate system support (Steinhauer, et al.1988; Walter, 1993).

The utility of various supports to foster parents are related to increased retention, quality of care provided decreased incidence of placement breakdown, and cost savings (Bebbington & Miles, 1990; Knapp & Fenyo, 1989; Knapp, Fenyo & Robertson, 1986; Martin, et al. 1993; Steinhauer, et al.1988; Tinney, 1985).

A search of the relevant periodical literature was conducted on the search terms "foster care, "foster parent," and "foster child" on the five databases including Child Abuse and Neglect, Psycinfo, Sociological Abstracts, Social Sciences Abstracts, and Sociological Abstracts. The references obtained are summarized in this paper. First, the history of foster care is briefly described before turning to estimates of its current magnitude, and a description of the characteristics of foster children and foster parents. Finally, a review of research on the needs and challenges of foster parents is presented.

History

Canada's foster-care policies have their roots in medieval England and colonial America. It was a widespread custom in medieval northwestern Europe to place children in a home other than the parental one. The purpose ranged "from actual abandonment to merely educating children away from the home" (Boswell, 1988, p. 207). Abandonment occurred frequently in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries (Tdly, Fuchs, Kertzer,, & Ransel, 1992) and poverty was often the cause (Gunnlaugsson, 1993). The Elizabethan Poor Laws of the early 17th century represented the emergence of the distinction between the "worthy" and "unworthy poor" The former were able-bodied but limited from participating in the work

of building the good society. The latter were of low moral character and refused to participate in approved societal behaviors (Kendrick, 1990). In the Poor Laws, it was first implied that the state had an obligation to provide at least minimal protections for children. Children of the "worthy poor" were more apt to be placed in orphanages to be taught "useful trades" and receive some education, while the children of the "unworthy poor" remained in the poorhouses (Wharf, 1993). Many children escaped the lot of these poor houses by being drafted into the navy or trained as apprentices and boarded out to the new lands, either Australia or North America (Kendrick, 1990), where they received "child care for child labor" (Thompson, 1989).

The development of a formal foster care system can be traced back to the founding of the North America's first child protection agency by Charles Loring Brace in 1853, New York's Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (Brace 1872/1993; Kadushin, 1980; Langsdam, 1964; Pumphry & Pumphry, 1961). This organization led a widespread movement by child welfare agencies to rescue children from the poverty and moral depravity of urban life and offer them a place in a wholesome rural setting where food, clothing, and shelter needs could be met, and a strong work ethic could be learned (Gallaway, Nutter,, & Hudson, 1995). The notion of "child care for child labor" was redressed and described as "loving care for child labor" although little evidence suggesting that children were better treated by caregivers is apparent (Thompson, 1989).

In 1887, John Kelso, a newspaper reporter and social reformer, founded the Toronto Humane Society for the Prevention of Both Cruelty to Animals and Children. Impressed by the success of family placement south of the border, Kelso also pursued the practice (Kendrick, 1990). Four years later, he became the first president of the Toronto Children's Aid Society that was established to protect and care for neglected children. He envisioned the Society as being in an ideal position to place children in "good," preferably rural, homes where they could experience "normal" family environments (Macintyre, 1993). An act for the prevention of Cruelty to and Better Protection of Children was passed in 1893.

This legislation included willful maltreatment and neglect, prostitution, poverty, and homelessness as causes for child protection (Reitsman-Street, 1986). At the time, voluntary charitable societies were given broad powers to protect children, including removal from the home and subsequent placement, supervision of children in their natural homes, as well as the management of children in municipal shelters for whom they possessed the status and prerogatives of legal guardians. They were empowered to collect a "reasonable sum" from their municipalities for the maintenance of wards (Ministry of Community and Social Services, 1979).

The practices of "child labor for child care" and "loving care for child labor" were frequently practiced throughout Canada in the early 20th century. A series of criteria that are among those that define modern foster care were generated at the first White House Conference on Children and Youth in 1909 (Gallaway, Nutter, & Hudson, 1995). The criteria specified that placements should not be caused by parental poverty only, foster care should be temporary and provided in the child's own community. It was specified that foster parents and foster children should be matched on the basis of the children's needs and the foster parent's skills. Finally, foster parents, according to the White House Conference criteria, should be reimbursed for out-of-pocket expenses.

Child welfare services in Canada began to change considerably by the mid-20th century, and the social work role changed from largely voluntary to paid professional positions. The criteria specified at the White House Conference were among those first formally recognized in the governance of foster-care services in Alberta in 1966 (Alberta Family and Social Services, 1989). However, Bernd Walter (1993) has recently documented problems with the foster care system. He described a fragmented system with rapidly changing personnel. There was minimal or inconsistent contact with social worker, considerable discretionary power of social worker to grant support, and reluctance by foster parents to seek additional support because they feared being perceived as inadequate caregivers, or to report case improvement because of the risk of a decrease in current

support. It was reported that foster parents had limited involvement in decisions affecting their foster children by their foster parents, inconsistent reporting of pertinent case history details and increased expectations about working with or monitoring birth families. He noted a lack of "matching" child to family due to high demand for placements. Each of these concerns was raised by both foster parents and foster children during recent consultations with stakeholders in the Edmonton Region (Office of the Commissioner, 1996).

Foster Families

Several challenges are apparent in the field of foster care (Walter, 1993). These challenges include difficulty recruiting new foster parents and retaining previous foster parents in the face of increasing numbers of exceptional foster children with inadequate system support (Bebbington & Miles, 1990; Cautley, 1980; Frank, 1980; Halfon & Klee, 1987; McIntyre & Keesler, 1986; Pasztor & Burgess, 1982; Pennie, 1988;). Despite these difficulties, many foster parents continue to provide care. In the following section, foster child and foster parent characteristics are described.

Child Characteristics

Due to disparity between the collection and reporting of child welfare data, precise estimates of the characteristics of these youth are difficult to obtain. As Wharf (1985) pointed out, "the child welfare community in Canada lacks basic data on the numbers of children in care by province, the reasons, and the trends" (p. 292). This concern is echoed by Raychaba (1988): "at present, the inadequacy of child welfare data collection stands as a major impediment to effectively addressing the special needs of youth presently and formerly in care" (p.24). Nevertheless, some broad characteristics of youth in foster care can be gleaned from the literature. Reasons for placement in care are reviewed before turning to the age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, placement history, and, finally, exceptionalities of children in foster care.

Data kept on youth entering care do not control for the placement made while in care. Children who come into care do not automatically access the foster care system. However, reasons that children come into care are generally related to the reasons that children enter the foster care system (Chamberlain, et al. 1992; Hampson, 1988; Simms, 1991). It was noted in the Crown Ward Administrative Review (Hart, 1984) that 25% of children entered care due to "inadequate parenting," 12% because of "rejection," 12% because of "neglect or abuse," and 12.5% due to "death or illness" (medial or psychiatric) of a parent. In Saskatchewan (Ens & Usher, 1987) 51% of children were in care due to neglect, 15% because of physical abuse, and 9.3% because of sexual abuse. In Alberta, (Federal-Provincial Working Group, 1996) there were 28,145 child welfare investigations in 1995. In approximately 36% of those cases there was no need for protective services, and in 13% protection needs were indicated but not substantiated. Following investigation, 14,130 child protection cases were substantiated. Approximately 33% of those cases were opened because of neglect, and in 22%, the condition of child prevented adequate care by guardian. Physical abuse was the reason for coming into care for15% of the cases, for 11% it was sexual abuse, 9% for emotional abuse, and, 8% for abandonment. In March of 1995, there were 4359 children in full-time care. Almost two-thirds (63%) were in foster care, and the next most frequent placement (11%) was in residential treatment.

Parental conflict and violence, rejection, neglect, and abuse experienced in the home frequently manifest in serious emotional and behavioral problems in children (Egeland & Sroufe, 1981; Herrenkohl & Herrenkohl, 1981; Hetherington & Martin, 1979; Hinde, 1980; McCoard, 1983). A foster child's biological family history of instability, is associated with problems such as aggression, anxiety, low self-esteem, depression, hostility, and feelings of rejection and abandonment (Husley & White, 1989; Klee & Halfon, 1987; McIntyre, Lounsberry, Bernston,, & Steel, 1988). Foster children also have been reported to have greater problems with interpersonal relationships (Price & Brew, 1999): self-isolation, detachment from caregivers, and withdrawing into themselves (McIntyre, et al. 1988).

Additionally, many of these children exhibit high rates of school problems and developmental delay (Hochstadt, Jaudes, Zimo,, & Schacter, 1987; Raychaba, 1988; Schor, 1989).

The Federal-Provincial Working Group (1996) reported that of the Alberta children in need of protection as of March 1995, approximately 31% were receiving services under a Support Agreement, approximately 26% under a Permanent Guardianship Order, 9% under a Temporary Guardianship Order, and 8% under a Temporary Guardianship Agreement.

In Ontario, about half of the children in the care are13 years of age or older (The Future of Foster Care, 1988). In Alberta, over half of those who receive foster care are over the age of 12, and the average age of youth in permanent care is increasing (Evans, 1997; Walter, 1993). Drug and alcohol abuse, delinquent behavior, and sexual promiscuity are most commonly faced by older youth in care, and thus, their foster parents (Barr, 1984; Campbell & Maslany, 1986; Raychaba, 1988).

Fitzpatrick (1992) cites a National Council of Welfare Report from 1979 in which it is stated: "one fundamental characteristic of the child welfare system, however, has not changed appreciably over the years: its clients are still overwhelmingly drawn from the ranks of Canada's poor" and goes on to assert that "while this statement is more than a decade old, a review of the literature suggests that it still holds true today" (p. 1). Raychaba (1988) asserts that "children and youth from poor families stand a greater chance of coming into care. They are twice as likely to return to care after being returned home on trial and, hence, are more likely to stay in care for longer periods" (p. 26). In Alberta, 80% of children in care come from families who have been or are in receipt of Supports for Independence benefits (Walter, 1993). A correlate of maternal poverty is substance abuse (Simms, 1991). Increasing numbers of children who have been identified as exposed to drugs before birth have been linked to a proportional increase in the appearance of these children in foster care in recent years (Soliday, McClusky-Fawcett, & Meck, 1994; Walker, Zangrillo, & Smith, 1991).

Ethnocultural minority youth are over-represented in the child protection system (Mech, 1983; Olsen, 1982). In Canada, Aboriginal children are highly over-represented in care. At least 35% of the children served by Alberta's Child Welfare system are of Aboriginal decent (Children's Advocate, 1991). In an earlier report a higher proportion of Aboriginal children in care is noted, at 42.2% (Johnson, 1983). One current estimate is that 55% of Alberta's current foster children are Aboriginal (Evans, 1997). Although Aboriginal children represent about half of the total number of children in Alberta's foster care system, all Aboriginal children constitute only 5% of the total Alberta population from 0-19 years of age (Working Committee on Native Child Welfare, 1987). It should also be noted that the rate of discharge from the system back to the natural family for Aboriginal children is also well below that of their non-Aboriginal counterparts (National Council of Welfare, 1979).

Several writers have expressed concern at the number of foster children who drift through foster care, abandoned by their families and neglected by the department or agencies supposedly assisting them (Gruber, 1987; Prosser, 1978; Raychaba, 1988; Reddy & Pfeiffer, 1999; Walter, 1993). The greater the length of time a child stays in foster care, the greater the likelihood that s/he will experience multiple placements (Pardeck, 1984). Multiple placements are associated with a greater prevalence and degree of behavioral and emotional problems (Pardeck, 1983).

Children with more and more complex needs are entering the system (Chamberlain, et al.1992; Frank, 1980). In addition, depending on the jurisdiction and the degree to which family preservation is pursued, children may be coming into care later, having had more negative experiences, leading to greater levels of emotional disturbance and behavior problems (Waldock, 1996). As well, there are a number of children and youth coming into care with physical handicaps and developmental disabilities (Hampson, 1988). Children with severe physical or mental disabilities who enter foster care are as likely to have experienced dysfunctional and abusive home environments or come from families who reported an inability to deal with the daily stress of raising that child as other children who

come into care (Bromley & Blacher, 1991; Jaudes & Diamond, 1985). The frequency with which varying forms of exceptionality are prevalent among the foster child population has led some to suggest that there is no practical merit to distinguishing between special needs foster children and those without special needs because the vast majority of foster children have "special needs" of one form or another (Steinhauer, 1988). Indeed, in a 1993 survey of Alberta foster parents, 80% of current foster parents and 66% of previous foster parents said that they have cared for foster children with severe developmental, physical, mental, emotional, or behavioral problems (Reichwein, 1996).

In summary, children in foster care have experienced abuse, neglect or abandonment by a biological parent, been raised in conditions of poverty, entered care at an older age, and are disproportionately Aboriginal in heritage. These children have been often in more than one placement since arriving into care and display some degree of developmental, physical, mental, emotional, or behavioral problems.

Foster Parent Characteristics

Their age, income, education, occupation, motivation, and life experiences have described Foster parents. A large proportion of foster parents are over the age of 30, most report low-to-moderate incomes, two-thirds have completed high school, and many work outside the home (Bebbington & Miles, 1990; Crowley, 1982; Martin, et al. 1992; Weiche, 1983). The occupations of those in Crowley's (1982) study fall evenly between blue and white-collar jobs. Martin, et al. (1992) reports that the foster parents in their study had underutilized home space, and want more children. The chief motivations and childhood experiences of 80 foster mothers by Dando and Minty (1987) are a desire to parent a child when it was impossible to conceive a child of one's own, and an identification with deprived children as a result of their own unhappy childhood experiences.

A survey by Stratix (1991) of Alberta foster parents was conducted. It was reported that 15.6% had less than 24 months experience. The majority has fostered for over 6 years and 38.7% of the total sample have fostered over 10 years. Most of these foster parents are

married and have children that still live at home. Over half have a high school education and 40% have post secondary education (Stratix, 1991). There are an equal number of female foster parents who are homemakers as those who are employed outside of the home (Stratix, 1991).

Needs

Considerable research has been conducted into necessary ingredients that promote effective foster care. The following review of the factors found in the literature includes training, payment, role clarity, professional recognition, relief, and support.

Training

Foster parent training is frequently identified as a necessary resource for foster parents (Boyd & Remy, 1979; Fees, Stockdale, & Crase, 1998; Steinhauer, et al.1988; Urquart, 1989). Training has been related to increased knowledge of child development and management, social-worker ratings, child-rearing efficacy and placement quality, as well as personal estimations of therapeutic potential (Jacobs, 1980; Noble & Euster, 1981; Kilroy, 1981; Steinhauer, et al. 1988). It has been suggested that the inclusion of foster fathers in training programs, utilizing a group approach, and the involving agency staff are essential characteristics of appropriate and useful foster parent training (Bastian & Odoms, 1983; Hampson & Tavormina, 1980; Jacobs, 1980; Rosenblum, 1977; Weiche, 1982). Newsletters may provide information in a form that is more convenient to use for many foster parents (Rich, 1996).

The content of training should be perceived as relevant and useful to foster parents (Lee, 1991). Foster parents desire the opportunity to add their own training needs to the curriculum (Freeling, Kissel,, & Surgent, 1976; Stenhauer, et al. 1988). Reportedly useful training topics are rights and responsibilities of foster parents (Noble & Euster, 1981), and information about the foster care system and agency (Hampson, 1985). Basic learning theory (Titterington, 1990), communication skills (Noble & Euster, 1981), dealing with difficult behavior (Lowe, 1990; Hampson & Tavormina, 1980), race and racism (Pennie,

1988), separation and loss (Urquart, 1989), and effects of foster-care placement on biological children (Poland & Groze, 1993) are also relevant and useful topics.

Payment

Foster parents need adequate payment for caring for foster children (Banks & Jamieson, 1990). Foster parents report that their allowances are inadequate to support the children in their care and need to be supplemented out-of-pocket (Edwards, 1980). Inadequate payment has been likened to a lack of recognition or status in the agency (Chamberlain, et al. 1992). Measuring the actual costs of providing care is difficult because of the many direct and indirect costs involved. Different methods have been proposed. Peterson (1974) and Shah and Poulos (1974) suggest that reimbursement be based on measures of direct cost, time, and skill level. Selles (1977) favors payment that attends to indirect costs based on household work per child, the price of good quality childcare for working parents, or salaries lost by caregivers by not working outside the home. Hazel (1981) submits that foster parents should be reimbursed to the same extent as child-care workers.

Role Clarity

The responsibility for the child who is being cared for by foster parents is shared by the department or placement agency, the foster parents, and in some cases, the biological parents. There is a tendency for roles to become confused (Eastman, 1982). A lack of role clarity can put strain on the social worker - foster parent relationship, a relationship that is critical to the quality of the care provided by that foster parent (Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998; Tinney, 1985). This tension can be reduced through a clearly defined working relationship between the agency and the foster parents that is specified in a detailed plan of care for each child (Galaway, 1978).

Professional Recognition

Foster parents increasingly have come to view themselves as quasi- or para-professionals (Waldock, 1996) and want to be seen as significant members of the child's

treatment team (Tinney, 1985). A "collegial" relationship with the agency and other professionals is associated with greater satisfaction to foster parents, improved decision-making for the child, and increased job satisfaction of foster parents (Martin, et al. 1992; Sanchirico, Lau, & Jablonka, 1988; Steinhauer, et al. 1988). The most direct approach in line with this perspective is hiring foster parents as agency employees (Waldock, 1996), as has been done in Finland (Szmanski & Seppala, 1995).

Some foster parents have advocated for professional status which includes specialized knowledge about children with special needs, incremental salary, and benefits (Galaway, 1978; Martin, et al. 1992). If this were to happen, caseworkers could be moved from a position of authority, where foster parent practice is uniformly closely monitored and evaluated, to a position that takes account of the experience of the caregiver (Bayliss, 1990; Foster Care, 1991).

Relief

Taking a break from fostering for a brief period, particularly from very high needs children, is frequently reported as a need for effective care-giving (Hazel, 1990; Martin, et al. 1992). Beneficial effects of frequent relief by means of housekeeping services, baby-sitting, weekend or crisis relief, day programming, and summer camps have been documented (Arkava & Mueller, 1978).

Support

The availability of skilled support workers is related to effective care giving. Personal qualities of the social workers valued by foster parents, include interest and commitment to the foster parent, warmth, reliability, trustworthiness, an ability to listen, and competence over official matters (O'Hara, 1986). Social worker consistency, as well as frequency and intensity of contact with the foster parent and child are of the greatest importance during the early months of placement (Aldridge & Cautley, 1975). It should be noted that the amount of involvement is less important than the availability and frequency of support (Chamberlain, et al. 1992).

Some essential support may come from other foster parents. Experienced foster parents may take on some of the social work tasks, serve as consultants to new foster families, and may even replace the caseworker completely (Galaway, 1978; Rowe, 1989; Triseliotis, 1988; Wannan, 1981). Additionally, in support groups, there are opportunities for mutual support, empathy, and problem-solving that has been reported to extend to education and support for the emotional needs of foster parents' own biological children (Bauer & Heinke, 1976; Steinhauer, et al. 1988). As well, associations of foster parents are valued highly by foster parents (Sellick, 1992).

The availability of local services to the foster family and foster child are reported as essential to the provision of effective foster care (Appathurai, et al. 1986; Gilligan, 1996). Psychiatric, psychological and educational specialist support is helpful (Conners, Fribourg, & Gries, 1998; Rosenfeld, Wasserman, & Pilowsky, 1999). To supplement the caseworker, a system of on-call family support services and accessible counseling services available to parents and siblings has been reported as useful, as has psychiatric consultation regarding the foster child (Bauer & Heinke, 1976; Lindsey, 1985). Recognizing the educational deficiencies of many foster children and the extended demands and needs for consultation placed on foster parents due to these deficiencies, educational consultation has also been reported as helpful (Aldgate, 1990).

In summary, research has been conducted into necessary ingredients that promote effective foster care. The needs identified in the literature on foster parenting include training, payment, role clarity, professional recognition, relief, and support.

Challenges

Several challenges that are related to placement breakdown or foster parent turnover are identified in the literature. These challenges include: behavioral and emotional problems of foster children, a lack of agency support, unprepared or unsupported loss of foster child, and finally, dealing with the biological family of the foster child.

Behavioral and Emotional Problems

Foster parents report that the most problematic component of fostering is the behavior of the children (Martin, et al. 1992; Scholte, 1997). This is an area where foster parents repeatedly identify inadequate assistance and cause to discontinue fostering (Berrige & Cleaver, 1987; Rushton, 1989). Children that come into care are likely to present multiple problems to their caregivers in terms of behavioral and emotional problems that are contrary to their expectations and are beyond what they perceive they can handle (Cooper, Peterson, & Meier, 1987; Doelling & Johnson, 1990; Rowe, Cain, Hundelby, & Keane, 1984). Foster-child conflict involving fostered, adoptive, or biological child sibling groups may cause family stress and in some cases, place biological children at greater risk for abuse (Poland & Groze, 1993; Rushton, 1989).

It should be noted that a lack-of-fit between foster parent skill level, expectations of the foster child, and the special needs of the foster child, is particularly related to placement breakdown and decreased retention of foster homes (Doelling & Johnson, 1990; Simms, 1991; Steinhauer, 1988). A chronic lack of qualified foster homes frequently results in mismatches (Walter, 1993). Particularly problematic is the failure to report serious behavioral problems by biological parents or social work staff to the foster parents (Frank, 1980). Consequently, the special needs of these children are not identified to foster parents who may not be prepared to manage their behavior (Walter, 1993). When special needs are not reported, foster children are unlikely to be appropriately referred early in the placement to community facilities for professional attention where appropriate (Simms, 1991). Academic and behavioral problems frequently occur in school and may cause difficulty for foster parents that lead to placement breakdown in the absence of specialist support, particularly if the level of school disruption is high (Brodzinsky, Schechter, Braff, & Singer, 1984; Martin, et al. 1992; St Claire & Osborne, 1987; Rushton, 1989).

Agency Support

A lack of respite and inadequate levels of financial reimbursement for care are closely related to placement breakdown and decreased retention of foster homes (Appathurai, Lowery, & Sullivan, 1986; Bebbington & Miles, 1990; Martin, et al. 1992). In the case of respite, the detrimental effect is most strongly associated with long-term placement (Aldgate, Pratt, & Duggan 1989; Webb & Aldgate, 1991). It has been noted that "Foster parents tell us that insufficient remuneration acts as a disincentive to continue fostering: 'We have enough love in our hearts, but our husbands don't have enough money in the bank...we aren't supposed to make money by being foster parents. But what its come down to is that we're subsidizing our foster children'" (Appathurai, et al. 1986, p. 9).

Separation and Loss

The length of time a child spends in care is typically vague, and although a foster placement is frequently a temporary arrangement, parents report being unprepared for the sudden loss of children in their care (Berridge & Cleaver, 1987; Martin, et al. 1992; Schwartz, 1994; Urquhart, 1989). Such a loss is difficult and painful, particularly if a strong attachment has formed over time (Eastman, 1979). Foster parents who report a lack of professional help and preparation for separation are reluctant to form strong attachments to foster children in the future (Wilkes, 1974). Biological children in the foster family also report difficulties understanding why foster children have left (Wells & D'Angelo, 1994).

Dealing with the Biological Family

Although visitation with biological parents is clearly critical to successful reunification, foster parents report that there is considerable stress involved from dealing with the biological parents of children in their care (Hampson, 1985; Jacobs, 1980; Jassal, 1981; Simms, 1991). Ambivalence may be caused by a desire to meet the child's needs but wanting no reminder about her or his past (Rushton, 1989). A decision which foster parents make, privately or publicly, to support or reject contact and reunification with the child's biological parent(s) is made on the basis of their perceptions of the motivations and capacity

to care for that child. If the assessment is unfavorable, the dealings are perceived to be harmful to the child (Wells & D'Angelo, 1994). Visits between parents and children are key to successful reunification (Loar, 1998), and may be associated with decreased internalizing and externalizing behaviors of foster children (Cantos, Gries, & Silis, 1997). However, these visits can in some cases cause severe trauma to the child, and place the foster parent in a very stressful situation from which pessimism about the ability of the system to care for children can result (Simms, 1991; Walter, 1993). It has been noted that parental visits are frequently associated with increased behavioral symptoms, particularly if strong emotions of life prior to placement are evoked (Gean, Gillmore, & Dowler, 1985; Littner, 1975).

Conclusion

The criteria for foster care identified at the first White House Conference on Children and Youth early this century were formally recognized in Alberta in the governance of foster care services in 1966. The issues raised at that time are among those that, according to Walter (1993), have not been adequately addressed in Alberta. Not unlike other Canadian provinces, in Alberta there is a shortage of foster placements. Placement breakdown and attrition are high. It behooves us to identify causes of this shortage, and identify why the number of active homes is decreasing.

It is evident that foster parents want and need to be trained to provide good foster care. In addition to basics about the Child Welfare system and information about how they can access professional services, they want to know about topics like behavior management, separation and loss, and the effects of fostering on their own biological children. Foster parents also need adequate payment for fostering. There is no clear consensus in the literature about whether foster parents should be paid as para-professionals or at least reimbursed for out of pocket expenses. The latter implies a minimum level of financial reimbursement that many simply do not receive. The role of each party involved, including social casework staff, foster care workers, Aboriginal services workers, foster parents, and

biological parents, needs to be specified. Repeatedly, foster parents report ambiguity in the roles of various players. Foster parents want good relationships with staff in the Child Welfare system in order to communicate efficiently and obtain needed resources (e.g. respite care).

There is also evidence in the literature that foster parents are faced with particular challenges that could contribute to placement breakdown and a decision to quit fostering. Foster parents want access to needed training and professional services when necessary to help manage behavior problems and the meet emotional needs of the children in their care. They need breaks from fostering and adequate support following the unplanned removal of a foster child from their home. They report considerable stress associated with dealings with biological families of the children in their care, and should be provided with information about their role versus the role of a social worker in those situations.

There is evidence in the literature to support the needs for training, adequate payment, role clarity, good relationships with Child Welfare staff, and access to professional assistance when necessary. Foster parents also report that they would consider quitting if not provided with sufficient information about the children coming into their care. They would consider quitting if not provided with respite, and sufficient financial support. Dealing with the biological parents or the loss of a foster child are stresses reported in the literature that are of sufficient weight to factor into a decision to quit fostering.

It would seem that the information necessary to guide changes to the foster care system is available. Although there is little evidence to support the generalizability of these findings beyond the jurisdiction in which the results were obtained, a number of potentially relevant variables exist in the literature. It is interesting to note that according to Walter in his 1993 review of the Child Welfare system in Alberta, these needs and challenges, without exception, are identified weaknesses in the system he reviewed at that time.

Are the needs of foster parents met in Alberta? What would make Alberta foster parents consider quitting? To find out the answers to these questions, one should ask foster

parents themselves. What are the most prevalent needs and challenges? What are the most important issues to address? These are important questions to consider in future foster parent research. The answers may provide clues as to what can be done to increase the number of foster homes, improve the quality of care provided, as well as increase positive outcomes for the children served by the foster care system.

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CHAPTER 3 - THE NEEDS OF FOSTER PARENTS: A CONCEPT MAP

Abstract

The purpose of the study was to describe the needs of foster parents as perceived by the foster parents themselves. Forty-nine parents from 30 foster families were asked to describe their needs in response to the following question: "What do you need to be a good foster parent?" In response to the question five themes were apparent. In the first theme, good working relationships with department staff, other foster parents and helping professionals in the interest of obtaining needed goods and services for foster children in their care was described. In the second theme, the need for cultural sensitivity, including openness, awareness and respect for cultural differences among foster children was described. In the third theme, the need for foster parents to have harmonious and stable relationships with immediate family members as well as skills to create and maintain such an environment was described. In the fourth theme, the need for foster parents to have adequate payment for their services was described. In the fifth theme, the need for a number of personality characteristics that are favorable to being a good foster parent, in addition to parenting skills obtained through experience were described. These themes were consistent with the literature, with the notable exception of respite, a need identified in the literature but not by the foster parents in this sample. The results of this study were consistent with the existing literature on the needs of foster parents.

There is a widespread and chronic shortage of foster parents (Chamberlain, Moreland & Reid, 1992; Kendrick, 1990). Foster care agencies and departments of child protection are experiencing difficulties in both recruiting and retaining foster parents. The children coming into care are older, more "experienced" in the system, or coming into care later (Appathurai, Lowry, & Sullivan, 1996). These children are often exceptional in more than one way and are staying in care longer (Schwartz, 1994; Sims, 1991). Advocates claim that the shortage of foster homes and the difficulty recruiting and retaining foster parents is due largely to inadequate system support (Walter, 1993).

Support to foster parents, in differing forms, has been found to positively associate with increased retention, quality of care, and decreased placement breakdown (Chamberlain, et al. 1992; Martin, et al. 1993; Steinhauer, et al.1988; Tinney, 1985). However, the views of foster parents about what this support would most appropriately entail, has not been investigated. There is a gap in the current literature with the absence of participant-defined issues and constructs.

Since foster parents are the front line of service delivery, their perceptions are important to determine how best to improve the responsiveness of the system to their needs. The purpose of the study was to describe the needs of foster parents as perceived by the foster parents themselves. Participants were asked to describe their needs in response to the following question: "What do you need to be a good foster parent?" Responses to this question were subjected to a statistical thematic analysis called concept mapping (Trochim, 1989a).

Literature Review

In the first section, the history of foster care is briefly described before turning to estimates of its current magnitude and a description of the characteristics of foster children and foster parents. A review of research into the needs of foster parents is presented.

A series of criteria among those that define modern foster care were generated at the first White House Conference on Children and Youth in 1909. It was noted that placements

should not be caused by parental poverty only, foster care should be temporary and be in the child's own community. Foster parents and foster children should be matched on the basis of children's needs and the parent's skills and foster parents should be reimbursed for out-of-pocket expenses (Gallaway, Nutter, & Hudson, 1995). These criteria were among those first formally recognized in the governance of foster care services in Alberta in 1966 (Alberta Family and Social Services, 1989).

Canada has over 60,000 crown wards in foster care with approximately 12,000 entering and leaving the system each year (National Council of Welfare, 1979). In Alberta, in 1985-86, in 2800 homes, 3100 youth were placed (Walter, 1993). It was reported that 20% of foster families were withdrawing in some regions (Walter, 1993). Between 1986 and 1988 the Edmonton Region reported a net loss of 454 foster homes, opening 6 and closing 18 on average per month (Walter, 1993). Presently in Alberta, there are approximately 3500 foster children residing in 1750 foster homes (Evans, 1997). Roughly 2000 of these children are permanent wards and 1500 are temporary wards (Evans, 1997).

Children in foster care have experienced abuse, neglect, or abandonment by a biological parent (Federal-Provincial Working Group, 1996). These children have often been raised in conditions of poverty, entered care at an older age, and are disproportionately Aboriginal in heritage (Children's Advocate, 1991; Evans, 1997; Fitzpatrick, 1992). System children have been in more than one placement since arriving into care and display some degree of developmental, physical, mental, emotional, or behavioral problems (Husley & White, 1989; Raychaba, 1988; Schor, 1989).

Considerable research has been conducted into necessary ingredients that promote effective foster care. The following review of the factors found in the literature includes training and payment, role clarity and professional recognition, relief and support.

Foster parent training is identified as a necessary resource for foster parents. Training has been related to increased knowledge of child development and management, parenting efficacy, and placement quality (Jacobs, 1980; Noble & Euster, 1981; Steinhauer,

et al. 1988). Foster parents need adequate payment for caring for foster children (Banks & Jamieson, 1990). Foster parents themselves have reported that their allowances are inadequate to support the children in their care and need to be supplemented out-of-pocket (Edwards, 1980).

There is a tendency for roles of the department or placement agency, the foster parents, and in some cases, the biological parents, to become confused (Eastman, 1982). A lack of role clarity can strain the social worker - foster parent relationship, a relationship that is critical to the quality of the care provided by that foster parent (Tinney, 1985). Foster parents increasingly have come to view themselves as quasi- or para-professionals, who deal with children that have greater emotional and psychological needs, and want to be seen as integral members of the child's treatment team (Tinney, 1985; Waldock, 1996).

The ability to take a break from fostering for a brief period particularly from very high needs children is frequently reported as a need for effective parenting (Martin, et al. 1992). Beneficial effects of frequent relief by means of housekeeping services, baby-sitting, weekend or crisis relief, day programming and summer camps have been documented (Arkava & Mueller, 1978). The availability of skilled support workers appears to be related to effective foster parenting. Social worker consistency, as well as frequency and intensity of contact with the foster parent and child are of the greatest importance during the early months of placement (Aldridge & Cautley, 1975). Some essential support may come from other foster parents. Experienced foster parents may take on some of the social work tasks, serve as consultants to new foster families and may even replace the caseworker completely (Galaway, 1978; Rowe, 1989; Triseliotis, 1988); Wannan, 1981). Psychological and educational specialist supports (Aldgate, 1990; Bauer & Heinke, 1976; Lindsey, 1985) are also reported as helpful by foster parents.

Method

Initially developed for planning and management applications, concept maps have been used for evaluation, survey design, curriculum development or theory building

(Trochim, 1989b). In particular, concept maps are useful to describe constructs for the purposes of research, where statements within the clusters provide direction for the operationalization of a concept. Concept mapping has been applied within the social sciences including the topics of depression (Daughtry & Kunkel, 1993), as well as the beliefs of chronic pain sufferers (Knish, 1994), battered women (Deby, 1993), and wives of brain-injured husbands (Lacene, 1996). The experiences of abused women with the justice system (Ludwig, 1996) have also been described through this method.

The concept mapping method is a statistical means to promote "trustworthiness" in the analysis of qualitative data. Those who sort the "raw" qualitative data, together contribute to the resulting concepts or themes, which represent the breadth and detail of all contributions. Each participant is given the opportunity to view all of the data collected and sort these data into groups that make sense to her or him. By not participating in the sorting procedure, the influence of the researcher on how the data are sorted is minimized. What distinguishes concept mapping as a method of qualitative data analysis, is that multiple participants generate multiple ideas and have the opportunity to view and sort all of the ideas generated by all participants. Their sorts are statistically analyzed and combined so that the analysis report equally represents the sort of each participant.

The role of the researcher in this method is to collect data and assign descriptive names to the themes the participants themselves determine through the generation and sorting of statements they collectively make. In the end, the participants define the issues and determine whether or not they share similarity with one another.

Components of Concept Mapping

According to Trochim (1989a), there are six major components to the concept mapping process. The first step is the generation of responses to a particular question asked of a specified group of respondents. Second, these responses are edited for clarity and to eliminate redundancies. Third, the statements are sorted into piles of like statements. The piles are considered to represent general themes. Fourth, two types of statistical analysis are

applied to the sorting of the statements to describe the relationship between statements and their groupings. A decision is made regarding the optimal number of concepts. Fifth, the major concepts are identified according to the contents of the cluster. Sixth, the map is used for its intended purpose: a graphical representation of the conceptualization process.

Preparation

To prepare for the concept-mapping process two steps were taken: participants were selected and the focus for conceptualization was determined (Trochim, 1989a).

Participants were obtained through the membership list of the Alberta Foster Parent Association (AFPA). The AFPA is a non-profit society that acts as "the collective voice and central resource for all foster parents in Alberta" (AFPA, no date). Membership is voluntary and includes 274 of the approximately 1750 foster families (Evans, 1997) in Alberta. Foster parents in Alberta are categorized according to skill levels representing increasing need for monitoring and treatment in response to increasing exceptionality of the children placed in those homes. Membership in the AFPA is not exclusive to any of those categories.

A description of the study was included in the AFPA's membership newsletter, "The Bridge" prior to commencement of data collection. Participants were selected at random from the membership list and contacted by telephone by the researchers. The alphabetical list was numbered, and a table of random numbers was used until 50 families were selected. Demographic data were collected in order to judge the variability of the sample. According to the demographic characteristics considered relevant to sampling foster parents in Alberta, including regional, urban / rural / reserve, Native / non-Native foster parents and foster children, years of experience, number of placements, number currently placed, the sample reflected sufficient variability.

Data were collected until a point of redundancy, where there were no more original responses made. In this study, redundancy was reached after interviewing both foster parents, when possible, in 30 families. A total of 27 females and 22 males participated.

Participants resided in varying regions of the province including urban, rural and reserve areas. Native and non-Native foster parents of Native and non-Native foster children participated. The number of years fostering among participants varied from less than 1 to 25, the number of current foster children from 0 to 5, and the total number of foster children cared for, from 1 to 200.

Participants verbally consented to a telephone interview that included the open-ended question: "What do you need to be a good foster parent?"

Generation of Statements

Participants generated responses to the question or focus of discussion. These statements represented the domain of interest (Trochim, 1989a). Statements were edited for clarity and essential meaning using an inter-rater agreement process (Trochim, 1989a). Three raters, including the researchers and child-care professional, reviewed the statements separately and edited for clarity and redundancy. The raters compared their ratings and arrived at agreement for each statement. For example, when editing for clarity a statement such as "I'm scared of allegations" was changed to "I'm scared of being reported as being abusive by my foster children." Editing for essential meaning may have reduced that statement to "I'm concerned about being accused of abuse." Redundant statements were removed. A total of 146 statements, including 87 by females and 59 by males, remained. Because there appeared to be few apparent gender differences between the responses, the statements were combined for the purposes of analysis, resulting in a total of 60.

Structuring of Statements

All participants were again contacted by telephone and asked to participate in the sorting task. A total of 20 consented to participate. Each of the 60 statements was printed on a separate card. A complete set of cards was mailed to each sorter in random order. Participants were instructed to follow a specific written procedure for the cards. They were asked to read through the cards in the stack and in accordance with Trochim (1989a), to group the cards "in a way that makes sense to you" (p.5.)." They were also asked to

record their sorting information. Sorters were asked to call the researchers when they had finished the task. Fifteen of the 20 sorters returned their data.

Representation of Statements

The conceptual domain was analyzed by two distinct statistical procedures and was followed by a decision about the optimal number of concepts for the final solution. Multidimensional scaling placed the statements spatially on a map and cluster analysis placed the points into clusters representing higher order aggregates of the statements. The Concept System (Trochim, 1987) was used to perform the statistical analysis and construction of the concept maps.

According to MacCallum (1988) the purpose of multidimensional scaling is to "represent and provide a basis for understanding the structure inherent in certain types of data involving judgments about stimuli" (p. 421). In the study, each statement was placed on a map called a point map (Trochim, 1989a). Statements that were closer together were more likely to be sorted into the same piles more frequently. Statements that were far apart were more likely to be sorted into different piles more frequently.

Bridging indices are values between 0.0 and 1.0 that reflect the degree to which the statement "bridged" or was sorted together with neighboring items. In general, the closer the value was to one for a particular statement, the more often that statement was sorted with statements in other regions of the map. As the value approached zero, the more likely that statement was sorted with others situated in that area of the map. Average bridging indices for clusters indicated the coherence of the constituent statements (Trochim, 1987), and the lower the index value for a statement, the more prominent it was to the theme represented by the cluster.

A second analysis was performed on the map data to represent the conceptual domain (Trochim, 1989a). This was hierarchical cluster analysis (Anderberg, 1973; Everitt, 1980). Cluster analysis utilized the multidimensional scaling X-Y coordinate values for each point, and grouped statements on the map into clusters that were intended to represent

underlying themes. The numbering of clusters reflected the order in which they were constructed, not importance or frequency.

The researchers examined maps with different numbers of concepts before arriving at a decision in favor of the five-cluster solution. The first solution reviewed included 12 clusters, and appeared fragmented with no clear themes apparent. By reducing the number of clusters by two, additional solutions were examined. Insignificant changes were introduced from reducing the number from 12 to 10, and 10 to 8. However, reducing the eight cluster solution to five represented a substantial improvement, forming the clusters labeled as "Good Relationships With Social Workers and Foster Parents," "Cultural Sensitivity," and "Personality Characteristics and Skills." Reducing the number of clusters to four collapsed the themes of "Support from Social Services" and "Family Cohesion" into one. The three-concept solution collapsed "Support From Social Services," "Family Cohesion" and "Personality Characteristics and Skills" into one. Both the four and three concept solutions appeared to be over-generalized and less useful. The five-concept solution appeared to provide the best interpretability.

Study Results and Their Relationship to Previous Research

The results of the study are presented and compared to the literature. Statements in Table 1 were collected from participants, edited, and then returned to them for sorting. The sort data were analyzed using the Concept System (Trochim, 1987), and the five concept solution was judged to provide the greatest interpretability (see Figure 3.1)

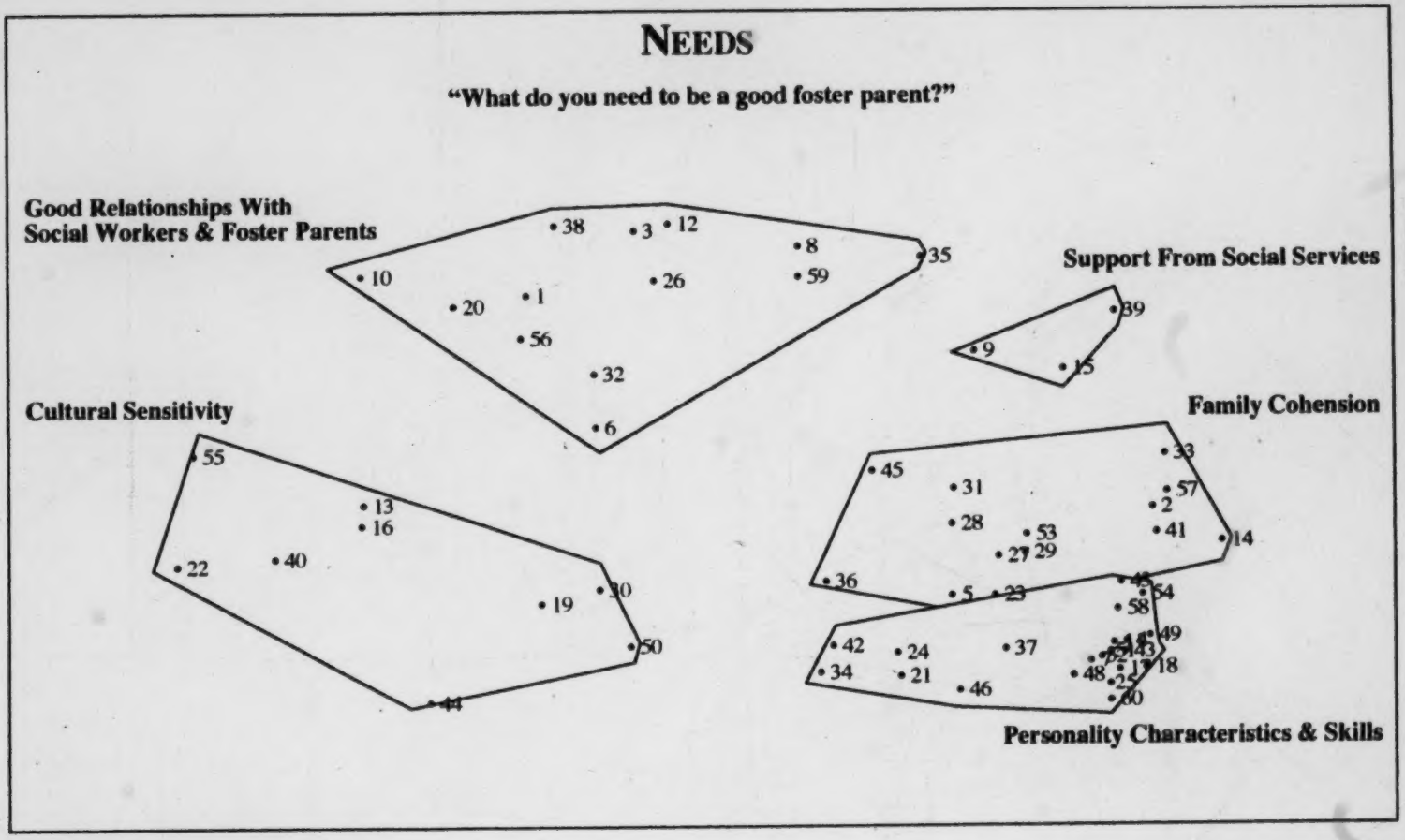

Figure 3.1: Concept Map of Needs

Table 3.1: Cluster Items and Bridging Values for Concept Map

Cluster and Statement	Bridging Index
Cluster #1 - Good Relationships With Social Workers and Foster Parents	0.57
12. help for children with special needs	0.47
38. special needs funding for foster child	0.49
3. relief help	0.52
6. advice from experienced foster parents	0.56
26. validation from department	0.56
59. tutoring for the foster children	0.56
1. contact with the social worker	0.57
10. the child's system records	0.59
20. advice from psychologists	0.60
32. open communication between parents, department, and professionals	0.60
56. good records of your conduct in case of allegations	0.61
8. equipment	0.64
35. ability to find resources for the child	0.65
Cluster #2 - Cultural Sensitivity	0.78
30. ability to trust the foster children	0.53
50. openness to different cultures	0.56
19. know a child's personality and ways	0.58
13. understanding of Native ways	0.73
16. biological children who help out	0.82
44. tolerance for biological parents	0.88
22. know the traditional ways	0.93
55. personal childhood experience in the system	0.99
40. housekeeping skills	1.00
Cluster #3 - Family Cohesion	0.26
23. believe that kids are our most important resource	0.14
29. a strong family unit	0.14
27. a stable home	0.16
5. interest in the foster children	0.17
53. ability to learn from the kids	0.22
31. open communication in the family	0.26
14. time	0.27
41. lifeskills	0.27
28. look beyond the race of a child	0.27
2. education	0.30
36. anger management	0.31
57. space in your home	0.33
45. harmony between foster children and our natural children	0.33
33. advocacy skills	0.47
Cluster #4 - Support From Social Services	0.61
15. support for biological children	0.55

9.	support	0.58
39.	good pay	0.72
	Cluster #5 - Personality Characteristics and Skills	0.10
11.	patience	0.00
17.	understanding	0.00
25.	caring	0.00
4.	love	0.01
51.	thoughtfulness	0.01
52.	calmness	0.01
7.	concern for children	0.02
18.	kindness	0.02
49.	consideration	0.04
47.	energy	0.05
48.	insight	0.09
60.	fairness	0.10
58.	emotional stability	0.11
37.	commitment	0.11
43.	high self-esteem	0.13
54.	family values	0.14
24.	the ability to overlook faults	0.21
46.	persistence	0.23
21.	parenting skills	0.25
42.	stress coping skills	0.31
34.	parenting experience	0.37

Cluster One: Good Relationships with Social Workers and Foster Parents

Cluster One was representative of the need for good working relationships as suggested by the statement: "open communication between parents, department and professionals." Working with social workers, other foster parents, as well as other professionals were also suggested by the following statements respectively: "contact with the social worker," "advice from experienced foster parents," and "advise from psychologists."

Reasons for functional relationships with social workers and other foster parents included access to resources such as "equipment," "relief help," "tutoring for the foster children," and specifically, assistance for children with special needs: "help for children with special needs," and "special needs funding for foster child." However, it was noted

that foster parents themselves needed the "ability to find resources for the child" which implied the presence of a necessary effort on their part.

Foster parents valued the availability of a reliable social worker that is perceived as trustworthy, caring, and competent (O'Hara, 1986). Additionally, the necessity of good relationships from other foster parents was identified (Steinhauer, et al. 1988) through both formal and informal supports. The need for good working relationships with other professionals in the community was also reported (Appathurai,, et al. 1986). Such relationships have been documented as helpful for obtaining needed services for children with special needs (Aldgate, 1990; Lindsey, 1985).

More specific to the apparent quality of relationships with social workers and the department of family and social services was the statement regarding the need to be appreciated for their efforts: "validation by the department." The need for foster parent recognition from the department was apparent in the growing literature on role clarity and professional recognition. The tendency for roles played by the social worker, department or agency, foster parents, and biological parents to be confused was reportedly strong (Eastman, 1982), and could easily lead to a lack of recognition for foster parent activities. One way to reduce confusion about roles and responsibilities and promote department recognition of foster parent efforts was to formally recognize foster parents as quasi- or para- professionals (Waldock, 1996).

Concern about investigations into conduct as a foster parent, was reflected by the statement: "good records of your conduct in case of allegations." Indeed, careful record keeping in case of allegations has been recognized as one component of a general legal knowledge that foster parents should have (Hampson, 1985; Noble & Euster, 1981; Swan, 1999).

In terms of bridging index, this cluster attained the middle average bridging value indicating that some items were sorted with statements in nearby clusters.

Cluster Two: Cultural Sensitivity

The theme of cultural sensitivity was suggested by the statement "openness to different cultures." Sensitivity to Native cultures was suggested in the statements: "understanding of Native ways," and "know the traditional ways." The need for recognition of cultural parenting differences was suggested by the statement "tolerance for biological parents." One way to gain cultural sensitivity to children and youth in care was implied by the statement: "personal childhood experience in the system." The relevance of cultural sensitivity by biological children was also implied in the statement: "biological children who help out."

A need for cultural sensitivity, including openness, awareness and respect for cultural differences was apparent in the literature on training needs of foster parents. Recognizing the high overrepresentation of Native children in Alberta foster care, Walter (1993) suggests providing non-Native foster parents with education about Native language and culture. He suggests that foster parents should be given instruction on the organization and structure of Native communities, and how to initiate and maintain contact with Aboriginal authorities. Additionally, foster parents should have programming on how to access Native resources, the stresses of racism on Native children, as well as ways to assist Native children feel proud of their heritage.

The empathy necessary to "know a child's personality and ways" may be manifested in an increased "ability to trust the foster children." The statement "housekeeping skills" seemed to be less related to the other statements in this cluster. However, it was implied that there were differences in day-to-day household operations that were attributed to cultural variation. This statement had the highest bridging value possible (1.00) suggesting that it was sorted with more statements than those contained in this cluster. This cluster had the highest average bridging value, suggesting that several of the items were sorted with statements in nearby clusters.

Cluster Three: Family Cohesion

The theme of family cohesion was represented in the data by the statements: "a strong family unit," "a stable home" and "harmony between foster children and our natural children." The statement "believe that kids are our most important resource" implied a value orientation possibly related to, and evidenced by other statements made in this cluster: "ability to learn from the kids" and "interest in the foster children." Another value statement, "look beyond the race of a child," suggested the presence of an awareness of individual differences in child development. The statement "open communication in the family" implied one quality of family interaction that may be seen to promote family cohesion.

The statements "lifeskills," "anger management, "and" advocacy skills, suggested skills for creating or maintaining family cohesion. By its inclusion in this cluster, the statement "education" suggested that these were learned skills.

The need for foster parents to have harmonious and stable relationships with immediate family members as well as necessary skills to create and maintain such an environment was implied in the literature on training needs of foster parents. This training included basic communication skills (Noble & Euster, 1981), dealing with family conflict (Lowe, 1991) as well as the effects of foster care placement on biological children (Poland & Groze, 1993). Additionally, the benefit of support groups and professional assistance to help parents and biological children in foster families develop or refine skills has been noted (Bauer & Heinke, 1976).

The statements implied functional prerequisites of family cohesion: "time" and "space in your home." This cluster attained the second lowest average bridging value, suggesting that the statements in this cluster were sorted with statements in neighboring clusters.

Cluster Four: Support from Social Services

These statements implied a connection to the department of social services, either directly, in the case of department foster homes, or indirectly through an agency, because of the link to payment that was suggested in the statement: "good pay." The need for "support" from social services was identified, and directed toward biological children of foster families in the statement: "support for biological children."

The need for foster parents to have adequate payment for their services has received considerable attention in the literature. However, measuring the actual costs of providing care has been difficult because of the many direct and indirect costs involved. Different methods have been proposed. Peterson (1974) and Shah and Poulos (1974) suggested that reimbursement be based on measures of direct cost, time, and skill level. Hazel (1981) submitted that foster parents should be reimbursed to the same extent as child-care workers.

This cluster attained the second highest average bridging value suggesting that the statements in it were sorted with those in nearby clusters.

Cluster Five: Personality Characteristics and Skills

Characteristics needed by foster parents were reported by the statements: "patience," "understanding," "caring," "love," "thoughtfulness," "calmness," "kindness," "consideration," "energy," "insight," "fairness," "commitment," and "persistence."

Attitudes toward foster parenting were implied by the statements "concern for children" and "family values." Foster parents also identified "emotional stability" and "high self-esteem" as needed qualities. "Parenting experience" may be related to a need for some opportunity and experience in child rearing. Skills identified by foster parents included: "parenting skills," "stress coping skills," and "the ability to overlook faults."

The personality characteristics favorable to being a good foster parent as well as parenting skills obtained through experience had considerable face validity. From research on the experience level of active foster parents in Alberta (Stratix, 1991) it was suggested

that most foster parents had experience raising their own children and the majority have been fostering for over 6 years. This cluster attained the lowest average bridging value, indicating that the statements were not often sorted with others on the map.

Conclusion

The concept-mapping method a means by which "trustworthiness" in qualitative data analysis is promoted. It is subject to the same qualifications as qualitative research. An estimate of frequency with which the statements are endorsed is not provided. A statement is only entered once and redundancies are not included in the sort. The position is that the breadth of views and experiences are what is being examined, not the frequency with which they are endorsed or their relative importance. These questions are however the worthy subjects of continued research. It is particularly important in this time of fiscal restraint to identify subgroup differences and relative importance of these needs so that policy and practice decisions are made on a sound empirical basis, and that financial resources are efficiently allocated.

The qualitative methodology employed in the present study distinguished it from other foster parent research. The foster parents described the issues. The issues were not determined a priori. These families had been providing care to foster children, and based on their experience, were asked to describe what they saw as the needs of foster parents. They provided detailed descriptions of those needs, and also grouped them into themes. This research began from the ground-up, from the foster parents themselves. The needs foster parents identified were generally consistent with the existing foster parent literature. Foster parents reported the need to have frequent contact, advice, and feedback from child protection staff, other foster parents, as well as other helping professionals. They needed access to resources for special needs children in their care. They needed openness to, education for, and experience with, children from different cultures, particularly Aboriginal cultures. They needed a strong and supportive family unit. They needed compensation for

the expenses they incur caring for children, and for the employment of their child-rearing skills.

The results of this study of a group of foster parents are consistent with the existing foster parent literature. This finding adds credibility to the existing literature on the needs of foster parents. Despite the lack of qualitative studies of foster parent needs, the research reported in the literature is consistent with the issues that these foster parents, when asked to speak about their experience, reported to us. Given that this research and the results found in the existing literature are much the same, it is suggested that the needs of foster parents are generally known, and that perhaps the variation in needs is less qualitative in nature and more quantitative in nature.

Given that there is good empirical evidence which can provide a solid working basis of knowledge for meeting foster parent needs, it behooves us at policy and practice levels to implement programming along these lines in hopes of improving recruitment and retention. For example, the components of helpful support programs are known. Leadership from experienced foster parents, group meetings for mutual support, information and training on important child care issues identified by the foster parents are reportedly helpful to some foster parents according to the literature and our study. It would likely to be helpful to know the effects on foster parent recruitment, retention, placement breakdown and care quality if such a program were implemented.

Foster parents have specific needs that contribute to success in fostering. The results of this study refer to qualities that should be emphasized or promoted among foster parents, and not necessarily to the issues that may more directly contribute to a decision to stop foster parenting. In order to find out about negative experiences that could lead to the decision to stop fostering, foster parents should also be asked about what would make them consider quitting in future research.

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CHAPTER 4 - THE CHALLENGES FACED BY FOSTER PARENTS: A CONCEPT MAP

Abstract

The purpose of the study was to describe the challenges faced by foster parents as perceived by the foster parents themselves, because they are on the front lines of service delivery. Forty-nine individuals from 30 foster families were asked to describe their challenges in response to the following question: "What would make you consider stopping foster parenting?" Responses to this question were subjected to non-parametric statistical thematic analysis, which yielded four themes. In the first theme, the challenges of working with the department of Child Welfare and its staff were described. In the second theme, the challenges related to indications that foster parents received about their work having low value in the perception of others, most notably, the department of Child Welfare, were described. Threats to family and personal safety, both physical/emotional and legal, were described in the third theme. In the fourth theme personal/familial and stress-related challenges that could cause thoughts of quitting foster parenting were described. These themes were consistent with the empirical literature.

Numerous reports speak of a chronic shortage of foster parents (Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992; Martin, Altemeier, Hickson, Davis, & Glascoe, 1992; Soliday, McCluskey-Fawcett, & Meck, 1994; Walter, 1993). Increasing numbers of older children, and children with physical, mental and emotional exceptionalities are entering and remaining in care (Appathurai, Lowrey, & Sullivan, 1996; Lee, 1991; Schwartz, 1994; Sims, 1991). Foster care agencies and departments are experiencing difficulties both recruiting and retaining foster parents, and advocates claim that this is due largely to inadequate system support (Steinhauer, 1988; Walter, 1993).

Supports to foster parents are related to increased retention, quality of care provided, decreased incidence of placement breakdown, and cost savings (Bebbington & Miles, 1990; Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992; Knapp & Fenyo, 1989; Knapp, Fenyo & Robertson, 1986; Martin, et al. 1993; Steinhauer,, et al.1988; Tinney, 1985). However, a noteworthy gap is apparent with the absence of participant-defined issues and constructs in foster parent support research. The type and frequency of challenges that foster parents themselves describe has not been the subject of published research.

Since foster parents are the front line of service delivery, their perceptions are important to determine how best to improve the responsiveness of the system. The present shortage of appropriate placements for children in government care dictates the need for research that can illuminate the qualities that enhance foster parent ability to provide care and those that serve as major challenges to their ability to provide care.

The purpose of the study was to describe the challenges faced by foster parents as perceived by the foster parents themselves. Participants were asked to describe their challenges in response to the following question: "What would make you consider stopping foster parenting?" Responses to this question were subjected to thematic analysis.

Literature Review

The history of foster care is briefly described before turning to estimates of its current magnitude and a description of the characteristics of foster children and foster parents. A brief review of research into the challenges faced by foster parents is presented.

A series of criteria among those that define modern foster care were generated at the first White House Conference on Children and Youth in 1909. It was noted that placements should not be caused by parental poverty only, foster care should be temporary and be in the child's own community. Foster parents and foster children should be matched on the basis of children's needs and the parent's skills and foster parents should be reimbursed for out-of-pocket expenses (Gallaway, Nutter, & Hudson, 1995). These criteria were among those first formally recognized in the governance of foster care services in Alberta in 1966 (Alberta Family and Social Services, 1989).

Canada has over 60,000 crown wards in foster care with approximately 12,000 entering and leaving the system each year (National Council of Welfare, 1979). In Alberta, in 1985-86, there were 2800 homes where 3100 youth were placed (Walter, 1993). It was reported that 20% of foster families were withdrawing in some regions (Walter, 1993). Between 1986 and 1988 the Edmonton Region reported a net loss of 454 foster homes, opening 6 and closing 18 on average per month (Walter, 1993). Presently in Alberta, there are approximately 3500 foster children residing in 1750 foster homes (Evans, 1997). Roughly 2000 of these children are permanent wards and 1500 are temporary wards (Evans, 1997).

Children in foster care have experienced abuse, neglect, or abandonment by a biological parent (Federal-Provincial Working Group, 1996). These children have often been raised in conditions of poverty, entered care at an older age, and are disproportionately Aboriginal in heritage (Children's Advocate, 1991; Evans, 1997; Fitzpatrick, 1992). System children have been in more than one placement since arriving into care, and display some

degree of developmental, physical, mental, emotional, or behavioral problems (Husley & White, 1989; Raychaba, 1988; Schor, 1989).

Factors related to placement breakdown and foster parent turnover are reported in the literature. Behavioral and emotional problems of foster children have been reported as challenges to foster parents (Berrige & Cleaver, 1987). A lack of agency support has been also identified in the literature as a major challenge to foster parents (Appathurai, Lowery, & Sullivan, 1986). Most recently, a literature base on the effects of separation on foster families following unprepared or unsupported loss of a foster child is developing (Schwartz, 1994; Wells & D'Angelo, 1994). Dealing with the biological family of the foster child is also reported as a challenge to foster parents (Rushton, 1989).

Method

The challenges faced by foster parents in North America have been identified in previous research. However, no study has included the gathering of provincial data on challenges of foster parents, beginning from the ground-up, that is, from the perspective of the respondents and not the researcher. Descriptive concepts that characterize the perceptions of foster parents are the results of a concept mapping analysis. Such data are necessary to supply service providers and researchers in Alberta with information that may form groundwork for continued discussion and development of provincial foster care standards and national guidelines.

Initially developed for planning and management applications, concept maps have been used for evaluation, survey design, curriculum development, or theory building (Trochim, 1989b). In particular, concept maps are useful to describe constructs for the purposes of research, where statements within the clusters provide direction for the operationalization of a concept.

Components of Concept Mapping

According to Trochim (1989a), there are six major components to the concept mapping process: preparation, generation of statements, structuring of statements, representation of statements, interpretation, and finally, the utilization of a map.

Preparation

To prepare for the concept-mapping process two steps were taken: participants were selected and the focus for conceptualization was determined (Trochim, 1989a).

Participants were obtained through the membership list of the Alberta Foster Parent Association (AFPA). The AFPA is a non-profit society that acts as "the collective voice and central resource for all foster parents in Alberta" (AFPA, no date). Membership is voluntary and includes 274 of the approximately 1750 foster families (Evans, 1997) in Alberta. Foster parents in Alberta are categorized according to skill levels representing increasing need for monitoring and treatment in response to increasing exceptionality of the children placed in those homes. All may be members of the AFPA. A description of the study was included in the AFPA's membership newsletter, "The Bridge," prior to beginning data collection. Participants were selected at random from the membership list, and contacted by telephone by the researchers. The alphabetical list of members was numbered, and a table of random numbers was used until 50 families were selected.

Data collection continued until no unique responses were being received. Both foster parents in each family were asked if they would participate. Twenty-seven females and 22 males from 30 families were interviewed. Participants resided in varying regions of the province including urban, rural, and reserve areas. Native and non-Native foster parents of Native and non-Native foster children participated. The number of years fostering among participants varied from less than 1 to 25, the number of current foster children from 0 to 5, and the total number of foster children cared for, from 1 to 200.

Participants verbally consented to a telephone interview that included the open-ended question: "What would make you consider stopping foster parenting?"

Generation of Statements

Participants generated responses to the question or focus of discussion. These statements represented the domain of interest (Trochim, 1989a). Statements were edited for clarity and essential meaning using an inter-rater agreement process (Trochim, 1989a). Three raters, including the researchers and child-care professional, reviewed the statements separately and edited for clarity and redundancy. The raters compared their ratings and arrived at agreement for each statement. For example, when editing for clarity a statement such as "I'm scared of allegations" was changed to "I'm scared of being reported as being abusive by my foster children." Editing for essential meaning may have reduced that statement to "I'm concerned about being accused of abuse." Redundant statements were removed. A total of 87 statements including 58 by females and 29 by males remained. Because there appeared to be few apparent gender differences between the responses, the statements were combined for the purposes of analysis, resulting in a total of 37.

Structuring of Statements

All participants were again contacted by telephone and asked to participate in the sorting task. A total of 20 consented to participate. Each of the 37 statements was printed on a separate card. A complete set of cards, in random order, was mailed to each sorter. Participants were instructed to follow a specific written procedure for the cards. They were asked to read through the cards in the stack and in accordance with Trochim (1989a), to group the cards "in a way that makes sense to you" (p.5.)." They were also asked to record the sorting information in the space provided. Sorters were asked to call the researchers when they had finished the task. Fifteen of the 20 sorters returned their data to the researchers.

Representation of Statements

The conceptual domain was analyzed by two distinct statistical procedures and was followed by a decision about the optimal number of concepts for the final solution. The results of multidimensional scaling were statements placed spatially on a map, and for

cluster analysis, the points were included in clusters representing higher order aggregates of the statements. The Concept System (Trochim, 1987) was used to perform the statistical analysis and construction of the concept maps.

According to MacCallum (1988) the purpose of multidimensional scaling is to "represent and provide a basis for understanding the structure inherent in certain types of data involving judgments about stimuli" (p. 421). In the study, each statement was placed on a map called a point map (Trochim, 1989a). Statements that were closer together were more likely to be sorted into the same piles more frequently. Statements that were far apart were more likely to be sorted into different piles more frequently.

Bridging indices are values between 0.0 and 1.0 that reflect the degree to which the statement "bridged," or was sorted together with neighboring items. In general, the closer the value was to one for a particular statement, the more often that statement was sorted with statements in other regions of the map. As the value approached zero, the more likely that statements were sorted with others situated in its area. Average bridging indices for clusters indicated the coherence of the constituent statements (Trochim, 1987), and the lower the index value for a statement, the more prominent it was to the theme represented by the cluster.

A second analysis was performed on the map data to represent the conceptual domain (Trochim, 1989a). This was hierarchical cluster analysis (Anderberg, 1973; Everitt, 1980). Cluster analysis utilized the multidimensional scaling X-Y coordinate values for each point, and grouped statements on the map into clusters that were intended to represent underlying themes. The numbering of clusters reflects the order in which they were constructed, but not importance or frequency.

Study Results and Their Relationship to Previous Research

Statements in Table 1 were collected from participants, edited, and then returned to them for sorting. Following the statistical analysis, the clusters were visually inspected and labeled by the researcher to represent the constituent statements of which they were made

up. The seven-cluster default solution produced by the program was judged to be reducible to a smaller number. Solutions with 10, nine, eight, six, four, and three concepts were examined, but the four-concept solution was judged to provide the greatest interpretability.

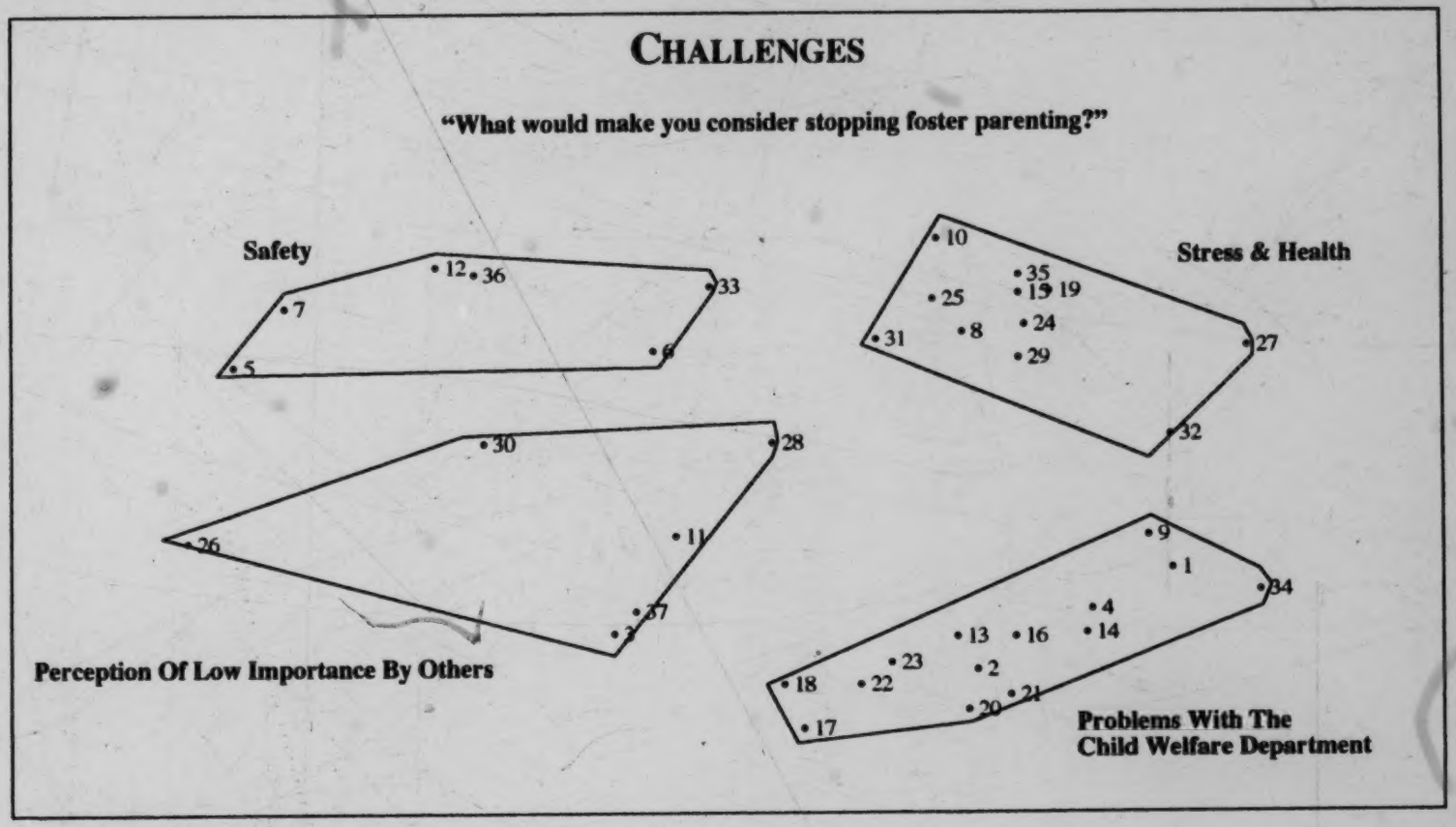

Figure 4.1: Concept Map of Challenges

Table 4.1: Cluster Items and Bridging Values for Concept Map

Cluster and Statement		Bridging Index
Cluster #1 - Problems With The Child Welfare Department		0.10
2.	unconcerned social worker	0.00
13.	social workers who aren't knowledgeable	0.01
21.	worker who didn't explain the actions taken	0.01
20.	no involvement in case planning	0.02
23.	broken promises by department	0.04
16.	having to train the social worker	0.05
14.	varying interpretations of Child Welfare Act by workers	0.06
22.	lack of critical information about kids from department	0.06
4.	worker coming unannounced	0.09
17.	intimidation by the social worker	0.12
18.	department bureaucracy	0.14
1.	dealing with Native services	0.22
9.	no relief help	0.25
34.	political stuff related to Native foster kids with non-Native foster parents	0.32
Cluster #2 - Perception of Low Importance By Others		0.44
28.	lack of income	0.20
11.	if can't choose which kids to take	0.27
37.	treatment like glorified baby-sitter	0.32
3.	having foster child pulled from my home with no advance notice	0.34
30.	negative response to my work	0.49
26.	interference from biological parents of foster children	1.00
Cluster #3 - Safety		0.50
33.	when these foster kids with us now turn 18	0.30
6.	win a lottery	0.33
12.	threats to our family's safety	0.45
36.	the turmoil that some kids bring into my home	0.48
7.	allegations of abuse	0.66
5.	aggressive behavior by foster child	0.77
Cluster #4 - Stress and Health		0.16
24.	too busy with other things in my life	0.07
8.	personal emotional issues	0.09
25.	difficulty in our immediate family	0.11
15.	stress	0.11
35.	if lost support of friends and family members	0.11
29.	the hurt when they leave	0.12
19.	my age	0.12
31.	unable to make commitment to look after a child	0.13
10.	personal medical problems	0.19
32.	fatigue from fighting for these kids	0.30

27. overwork 0.39

Cluster One: Problems with the Child Welfare Department

Cluster one was representative of challenges foster parents reported in their dealings with the department of Child Welfare: "broken promises by department" and "department bureaucracy." Statements in this cluster were oriented around particular difficulties with the department and social work staff. Characteristics of unsatisfactory working relationships with social workers were apparent in some statements: "worker who didn't explain the actions taken," "worker coming unannounced," and "intimidation by the social worker." Other statements were specific to difficulties experienced with social worker's level of concern, helpfulness, and knowledge level: "unconcerned social worker," "social workers who aren't knowledgeable," and "having to train the social worker." The need for consistent, knowledgeable, and accessible department staff is apparent in the support literature (Aldridge & Cautley, 1975; O'Hara, 1986). Information about foster parent rights and responsibilities (Noble & Euster, 1981), the department of child welfare (Hampson, 1985) and interacting with department staff (Noble & Euster, 1981) have been identified as training needs for foster parents.

The statement "no relief help" is echoed in the literature. Respite in the forms of housekeeping services, baby-sitting, weekend breaks, and summer programming have been reported as helpful by foster parents (Arkava & Mueller, 1978).

Foster parents indicated that they had a "lack of critical information about kids from the department" and "no involvement in case planning." A lack of information to the foster parent about particular difficulties the foster children have may result in inappropriate expectations by the foster parents, and become more than what they perceive that they can handle (Cooper, Peterson, & Meier, 1987; Doelling & Johnson, 1990). This is consistent with the need for matching the skills of the foster parent to the needs of the foster child (Simms, 1991).

It appeared that foster parents had some challenging experiences with services for Native children from the statements: "political stuff related to Native foster kids with non-Native foster parents" and "dealing with Native services." There is concern about the need for Native children to be reconnected or remain connected to their culture (Walter, 1993). The control of services to Aboriginal children by their communities in this province is being sought. Provisions have been made for Native children to remain as close to their communities as much as this is possible.

Cluster Two: Perception of Low Importance by Others

Statements in this cluster were related to indications that foster parents received about their work having low value. It was reported that a "negative response to my work" and a "lack of income" would have made one consider quitting foster parenting. Inadequate payment has been likened to a lack of status as a service provider by foster parents, and foster parents have reported the need for adequate payment for the care of foster children (Banks & Jamieson, 1990; Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992).

Foster parents described deprecating experiences in the following statements: "treatment like glorified baby-sitter" and "having foster child pulled from my home with no advance notice." The statement "if can't choose which kids to take" may have been related to a need for matching of foster parent and foster child. Foster parents have increasingly come to view themselves as quasi- or para- professionals (Waldock, 1996). A more collegial relationship with department staff is related to greater work satisfaction and better decision-making for the child (Martin, et al. 1992; Sanchirico, 1998; Steinhauer, et al. 1988).

Observed interference from biological parents has an effect on the length of placement may have implied by the statement "interference from biological parents of foster children." Foster parents have reported considerable stress around dealing with biological parents, particularly if they do not favor the contact (Hampson, 1985; Simms, 1991; Wells & D'Angelo, 1994). Potential increases in behavioral symptoms exhibited by children in

some cases following contact with a biological parent as well as concerns about the safety of reunification can cause serious concern about the child's welfare once s/he has left the foster home (Gean, Gillmore, & Dowler, 1985). Recently, in this province, a four-year old boy was killed following his return to a biological parent (Liberals challenge figures, 1988).

Cluster Three: Safety

Statements in this cluster were mostly related to concerns about family safety: "threats to our family's safety," "aggressive behavior by foster child," and "the turmoil that some kids bring into my home." The safety of family members, particularly around the interactions with other children in the home, is identified in the literature (Poland & Groze, 1993). Such safety concerns may be related to a lack of foster parent preparedness, perhaps caused by inaccurate or inadequate case information which has been identified as leading to mismatches between foster parent expectations and foster child needs (Cooper, Peterson, & Meier, 1987; Doelling & Johnson, 1990; Rowe, Cain, Hudelby, & Keane, 1984).

The statement "allegations of abuse" is related to foster family and foster child safety. This is an important issue that has been the subject of research (Hicks & Nixon, 1991; Morrisette, 1993). Children should be protected from maltreatment while in care. Appropriate investigations should be carried out in order to arrive at an appropriate judgment in cases where abuse was reported.

Cluster Four: Stress and Health

Statements in this cluster were generally related to concerns about stress level and health: "stress," "personal emotional issues" and "personal medical problems." Fatigue was also stated as a reason for quitting foster parenting: "fatigue from fighting for these kids," and "overwork." Stress concerns are reported in Walter's (1993) review of the Child Welfare system in Alberta. In the report, a comment from a foster parent is cited: "foster parents sink or swim on their own; when they have had enough or can't take it anymore, they quit!" (p. 99).

Difficulties in the family and loss of supportive friends were reasons for stopping foster parenting. Foster parents reported: "difficulty in our immediate family" and "if lost support of friends and family members." These difficulties have been described in the literature in terms of biological-foster child relationship quality, and at the most negative end, the commission of abuse by one at the hand of the other (Bauer & Heinke, 1976; Poland & Groze, 1993).

The statement "the hurt when they leave" appeared to be related to the effect on the foster parents of the loss of a foster child from their home. The impact of an unplanned removal of a foster child from the home of a foster parent can have a serious emotional effect on the foster family of sufficient magnitude to weigh into the decision about taking in more foster children (Eastman, 1979; Wells & D'Angelo, 1994).

Finally, the level of commitment made to raising foster children and its level of priority were identified as causes for stopping: "unable to make commitment to look after a child" and "too busy with other things in my life." Judging from items in this cluster related to fatigue and overwork as well as lack of time and interest, it may be that the other challenges described elsewhere in this paper are achieving some kind of combined effect in the manifestation of high stress and low motivation for continuing to be a foster parent.

Conclusion

Concept mapping is a means by which "trustworthiness" in qualitative data analysis may be promoted. It is subject to the same qualifications as qualitative research. An estimate of frequency with which the statements are endorsed is not provided. A statement is only entered once and redundancies are not included in the sort. The position is that the breadth of views and experiences are what is being examined, not the frequency with which they are endorsed or their relative importance. These questions are however, the worthy subjects of continued research. It is particularly important in this time of fiscal restraint to identify subgroup differences and relative importance of these needs so that policy and

practice decisions are made on a sound empirical basis, and that financial resources are efficiently allocated.

The qualitative methodology employed in the present study distinguished it from other foster parent research. The foster parents described the issues. The issues were not determined a priori. These families had been providing care to foster children, and based on their experience, were asked to describe what they saw as the needs of foster parents. They provided detailed descriptions of those challenges, and also grouped them into themes. This research began from the ground-up, and the experiential data came from the foster parents themselves.

The challenges foster parents identified were generally consistent with the existing literature. Foster parents reported that poor relationships with Child Welfare staff were a challenge. They also reported that perceiving that their work had low value in the estimations of others would cause them to consider quitting. Threats to family and personal safety were also reported as challenges. Finally, personal health and stress-related issues could cause them to quit fostering.

The results of this study of a group of foster parents are consistent with the existing foster parent literature. This finding adds credibility to the existing literature on the challenges faced by foster parents. Given that this research and the results found in the existing literature are much the same, it is suggested that the challenges faced by foster parents are generally known, and that perhaps the variation in those challenges is less qualitative in nature and more quantitative in nature.

Foster parents face challenges that contribute to a decision to stop fostering. The results of the present study refer to factors that should be reduced. These factors may not however, be representative of the views of most foster parents. In future research, these factors should be measured for their prevalence and priority to foster parents.

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CHAPTER 5 – NEEDS AND CHALLENGES OF ALBERTA FOSTER PARENTS

Abstract

Participants responded to a telephone survey asking about the needs and challenges they face in their role as foster parents. The survey consisted of statements gathered by the authors during previous interviews with members of the same population. Participants were asked to rate their degree of agreement or disagreement with the statements. Foster parents report having the necessary characteristics and skills to foster, that support from their own families is strong, and that they benefit from the support of other foster parents. What is much less frequent is adequate support from the department of child welfare. Ninety-five per cent of the foster parents want to be involved in department decisions about their foster children. However, more than half report that they are not provided with sufficient case information. Almost one third of those interviewed indicated that they were becoming tired of "fighting on behalf of" their foster children. The major negative influence on their ability to care for foster children is the lack of a positive relationship and support from the children's services system.

There is a chronic shortage of foster parents (Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992; Martin, Altemeier, Hickson, Davis, & Glascoe, 1992; Soliday, McCluskey-Fawcett, & Meck, 1994; Walter, 1993). Older children, with physical, mental and emotional exceptionalities, are entering and remaining in care (Appathurai, Lowrey, & Sullivan, 1996; Lee, 1991; Schwartz, 1994; Sims, 1991). Foster care agencies and departments are experiencing difficulties both recruiting and retaining foster parents and it is claimed that this is due to inadequate system support (Steinhauer, et al. 1988; Walter, 1993).

Various supports to foster parents are associated with retention, quality of care, placement breakdown, and cost savings (Bebbington & Miles, 1990; Chamberlain, et al. 1992; Knapp & Fenyo, 1989; Knapp, Fenyo & Robertson, 1986; Martin, et al. 1993; Steinhauer, et al. 1988; Tinney, 1985).

The purpose of this study was to describe the prevalence of the needs and challenges of foster parents. In two other studies (Brown & Calder, 1999a; Brown & Calder, 1999b), foster parents were asked for their needs and challenges in response to the questions: "What do you need to be a good foster parent?" and "What would make you consider stopping fostering?" The responses to these questions were analyzed using the Concept Method (Trochim, 1987), a quantitative means to analyze qualitative data. Participants provided responses that they were asked to sort into groups of their own choosing. The participants' groupings were represented as concepts. These concepts formed the basis of an instrument to answer the question: "To what extent to foster parents report experience the same needs and challenges?"

Foster Parent Needs and Challenges

Considerable research has been conducted into necessary ingredients that promote effective foster care. Training, payment, role clarity, professional recognition, respite, and professional support are all reported in the literature (Appathurai, et al. 1986; Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992; Martin, et al. 1992; Steinhauer, et al. 1988; Triseliotis, 1988; Waldock, 1996).

Variables associated with placement breakdown and foster parent turnover are apparent in the literature. Such challenges include behavioral and emotional problems of foster children, a lack of agency support, unprepared or unsupported loss of a foster child, and dealing with the biological family of the foster child (Bebbington & Miles, 1990; Berrige & Cleaver, 1987; Rushton, 1989; Wells & D'Angelo, 1994).

Method

A random sample of foster parents from the membership of the Alberta Foster Parent Association were asked about their needs and challenges (Brown & Calder, 1999a; Brown & Calder, 1999b). The results of concept mapping analyses (Trochim, 1987) of these qualitative data resulted in nine themes that formed the basis for the survey questions in the present study.

In response to the question: "What do you need to be a good foster parent?" five general themes were generated (Brown & Calder, 1999a). There was a reported need for good working relationships with department staff, other foster parents and helping professionals in the interest of obtaining needed goods and services for foster children in their care. A need for cultural sensitivity, including openness, awareness and respect for cultural differences among foster children was reported. Foster parents need to have harmonious and stable relationships with all immediate family members as well as necessary skills to create and maintain such an environment. Foster parents need to have adequate payment for their services as foster parents. Finally, foster parents reported the need for a number of personality characteristics that are favorable to being a good foster parent as well as parenting skills obtained through experience.

In response to the question: "What would make you consider stopping foster parenting?" four themes were generated (Brown & Calder, 1999b). Foster parents described the challenges of working with the department of Child Welfare and its staff. Foster parents described their perceptions of their work having low value in the estimation of others, most notably, the department of Child Welfare. Threats to family and personal

safety, both physical/emotional and legal, were described in the third theme. Finally, personal/familial and stress-related challenges that could cause thoughts of quitting foster parenting were identified.

Subjects

Participants were obtained through the membership list of the Alberta Foster Parent Association (AFPA). The AFPA is a non-profit society that acts as "the collective voice and central resource for all foster parents in Alberta" (AFPA, no date). There were 274 family members of the AFPA. A description of the study was included in the AFPA's membership newsletter, "The Bridge," prior to commencement of data collection. Participants were selected at random from the membership list, and contacted by telephone by the researchers. The alphabetical list of members was numbered, and a table of random numbers was used until 100 families were selected. Participants were contacted by telephone by the researchers and verbally consented to a telephone survey.

Measures

The survey included questions about basic demographics: gender, geographic location and size, age, number of years fostering, ethnicity, number of current foster children, and total number of foster children cared for. The age, gender, length of placement, ethnicity, and ratings of social, academic, physical and mental well being for each foster child currently in care were also obtained. Ratings of stress, burden, and locus of control were requested.

Foster parents were asked to rate their level of agreement/disagreement with statements constructed from each of the themes generated in the concept mapping studies (Brown & Calder, 1999a; Brown & Calder 1999b). Foster parents described five needs and four challenges. It was decided that two statements from each theme would be representative of each, and were included on the survey. In order to obtain a true measure of agreement, one statement was worded in a positive direction and the other in a negative direction.

The theme labeled Good Relationships with Social Workers and Foster Parents, was represented by the statements: "I benefit from the advice and experience of other foster parents," and "I have had bad relationships with social workers." The theme labeled Cultural Sensitivity, was represented by the statements: "I know about Native culture," and "Cultural differences are not relevant to raising foster children." The theme labeled Family Cohesion, was represented by the statements: "People in my family support our foster children," and "We have had problems between our biological and foster children." The theme labeled Support from Social Services, was represented by the statements: "I do not receive enough family support from social services," and "I should be paid more by social services." The theme labeled Personality Characteristics and Skills, was represented by the statements: "Some foster parents don't have the right personality," and "I have good parenting skills that help me to be a good foster parent."

The theme labeled Problems with the Child Welfare Department, was represented by the statements: "I have not been given enough case information," and "I should be involved in department decisions about my foster children." The theme labeled Perception of Low Importance by Others, was represented by the statements: "Foster parents are treated like professionals," and "Biological parents have interfered." The theme of Safety, was represented by the statements: "The safety of my family has not been threatened by a foster child," and "I am concerned about being accused of abuse." Finally, the theme of Stress and Health, was represented by the statements: "My health affects how well I foster," and "I'm getting tired of fighting on behalf of these children."

Results

The sample characteristics are described before turning to the ratings of needs and challenges faced by foster parents.

Sample Characteristics

One hundred foster parents from 78 families participated in the study. Sixty-three per cent of the participants were female, and 37% were male. Fifteen per cent of the foster

parents were Native and 85% were non-Native. Half of the foster families lived in or north of the Greater Edmonton area, 23% in central Alberta, and 27% in or south of the Greater Calgary area. Twenty-four per cent resided in communities of 100,000 or more, 35% in communities with a population between 99,999 and 1000, and 41% in communities smaller than 1000 and rural areas. Together, these foster parents were caring for a total of 226 foster children at the time of interview. Forty-seven per cent of the foster children were male and 53% were female. Sixty-five per cent of the foster children were Native and 35% were non-Native. Additional foster parent and foster child characteristics are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 5.1: Foster Parent Characteristics

	M	SD	X_{Max}	X_{Min}
Age	46.9	9.7	28	71
Number of Years Fostering	8.9	8.4	0	45
Number of Foster Children Cared for	41.4	92.6	1	550
Number of Current Foster Children	2.2	1.3	1	6

Table 5.2: Foster Child Characteristics

	M	SD	X_{Max}	X_{Min}
Age	8.6	5.3	18	1
Length in Current Placement (months)	29	30.6	144	1

Children were rated by foster parents on relationships with peers, relatives and other foster parents. Additionally, their school achievement, physical, and emotional health were rated (see Table 3). These ratings were on a three-point scale, from "no difficulty" to "some difficulty" or "a lot of difficulty." Higher scores reflected less difficulty. The scores were in the "some" to "no difficulty" range.

Table 5.3: Relationship and Health Ratings

	M
Peer Relationships	2.1
Foster Family Relationships	2.5
Foster Parent Relationships	2.6
School Achievement	2.0
Physical Health	2.6
Emotional Health	2.1

Foster parents were asked to rate their locus of control, personal stress, and sense of burden on five-point scales (see Table 4). Higher numbers on these scales reflected greater degree of perceived control over foster children's behavior, greater stress associated with foster parenting, and greater burden placed on them by having foster children. The average rating of locus of control was in the "behavior is somewhat under my control" range. Personal Stress, and Sense of Burden average scores were in the "moderate" to "low" ranges.

Table 5.4: Foster Parenting Ratings

	M
Locus of Control	3.0
Personal Stress	1.8
Sense of Burden	1.6

Needs and Challenges

Foster parents were asked to rate their degree of agreement or disagreement to 18 statements on a seven point scale: "strongly agree," "moderately agree," "slightly agree," "neutral," "slightly disagree," "moderately disagree," and "strongly disagree." Lower scores (1, 2 or 3) measured agreement, 4 was a neutral response, and higher scores (5, 6, or 7) measured disagreement (see Table 5).

Table 5.5: Needs and Challenges

	% Agree			%	% Disagree				
	Strongly	Moderate	Slightly	Neutral	Slightly	Moderate	Strongly	Mean	S.D.
1) I benefit from the advice and experience of other foster parents.	61	28	4	3	2	0	1	1.6	1.2
2) I have had bad relationships with social workers.	14	12	16	5	8	17	28	4.4	2.2
3) I know about Native culture.	21	47	22	4	2	3	1	2.3	1.2
4) Cultural differences are not relevant to raising foster children.	14	7	4	3	9	31	32	5.1	2.2
5) People in my family support our foster children.	86	11	2	0	0	1	0	1.2	0.6
6) We have had problems between our biological and foster children.	3	15	15	2	2	7	56	5.2	2.2
7) I do not receive enough family support from social services.	9	28	9	4	5	19	26	4.3	2.3
8) I should be paid more by social services.	24	13	7	19	5	18	14	3.8	2.2
9) Some foster parents don't have the right personality.	39	25	10	13	5	2	6	2.5	1.8
10) I have good parenting skills that help me to be a good foster parent.	70	23	4	3	0	0	0	1.4	0.7
11) I have not been given enough case information.	23	29	10	3	2	14	19	3.5	2.3
12) I should be involved in department decisions about my foster children.	64	22	4	5	2	2	1	1.7	1.2
13) Foster parents are treated like professionals.	8	20	13	8	9	17	25	4.4	2.1
14) Biological parents have interfered.	15	11	23	7	5	18	21	4.1	2.2
15) The safety of my family has not been threatened by a foster child.	42	10	4	0	9	19	16	3.5	2.5
16) I am concerned about being accused of abuse.	31	25	12	2	1	7	22	3.3	2.4
17) My health affects how well I foster.	51	18	6	4	3	7	11	2.6	2.1
18) I'm getting tired of fighting on behalf of these children.	10	14	7	5	2	14	48	5.1	2.3

High ratings of agreement were found on several statements. The highest average agreement was found for the statement "People in my family support our foster children," followed by "I have good parenting skills that help me to be a good foster parent," "I benefit from the advise and experience of other foster parents," " I should be involved in department decisions about my foster children," and "I know about Native culture." These statements also had the lowest response variation, which indicated a generally consistent high level of agreement by foster parents about having a supportive family, good parenting skills, benefiting from the advise of other foster parents, being involved in department decisions about their foster children, and knowing about Native culture.

Although having higher response variation, the statements "Some foster parents don't have the right personality," " My health affects how well I foster," and "I have not been given enough case information" were either strongly or moderately agreed with by the majority of foster parents. It was significant that approximately two-thirds of foster parents reported that others did not have the appropriate characteristics to provide good care for foster children and that their own health affected their ability to care for their foster children. Over half of foster parents reported that they had not been given enough case information about their foster children.

The highest ratings of disagreement were on the statements "We have had problems between our biological and foster children," "Cultural differences are not relevant to raising foster children," and "I'm getting tired of fighting on behalf of these children." Average ratings for these statements were in the "slight disagreement" range. However, for each of these statements, almost two-thirds of foster parents either strongly or moderately disagreed. Almost two-thirds of foster parents reported having no problems between their biological and foster children, that cultural differences were relevant to raising foster children and that they were not getting tired of fighting on behalf of their foster children.

A considerable degree of variation was apparent among responses to some statements. The statements "The safety of my family has not been threatened by a foster

child" and "I am concerned about being accused of abuse" had the greatest response variation of all the statements. Although there was little consensus on these experiences by the foster parents, the finding that 44% of foster parents said that the safety of their family had been threatened by a foster child was significant. Additionally, the finding that over two-thirds of foster parents were concerned about being accused of abuse is noteworthy.

The remaining six statements also had standard deviations between 2.1 and 2.3 reflecting the presence of some variation in responses. Responses were distributed in a way that suggested no clear consensus (agreement or disagreement) among these foster parents on these statements. However, the prevalence of agreement/disagreement with these statements was noteworthy. Almost half of foster parents agreed with the statements "I do not receive enough family support from social services" and "I should be paid more by social services." Half of the foster parents agreed with the statement "Biological parents have interfered" Almost half of foster parents agreed with the statement "I have had bad relationships with social workers" and just over half disagreed with the statement "Foster parents are treated like professionals." These results suggested that considerable proportions of foster parents did not receive enough family and financial support from social services, have had experience with "interfering" biological parents, bad relationships with social workers, and have not been treated as professionals.

Discussion

The findings for the needs and challenges data are discussed, followed by the ratings of locus of control, stress, and sense of burden. Differences in response by subgroups of gender, geographic location, rural/urban, foster parent age, number of years fostering, ethnicity, number of current foster children, and the total number of foster children cared for are noted if apparent. It is noteworthy that of all of the demographic variables, no gender differences nor urban / rural differences were apparent in the statement data results.

Needs and Challenges

Foster parents tended to agree or disagree with the statements in the survey. Only one question had "neutral" responses over 10%. It was noted that during interviews, laughter on the part of several foster parents during the reading of statements supported the relevance of these issues.

Consistent with literature on the benefits of mutual aid and support of foster parents by one another (Steinhauer, et al. 1988), foster parents reported that they benefited from the advice and experience of other foster parents. This statement was agreed to by 93% of foster parents, indicating that the assistance of other foster parents was helpful to most of them. No differences between subgroups were noted, suggesting that this was an issue that was not relative to different groups of foster parents according to the variables included in this study.

According to Walter (1993) good relationships between foster parents and social workers is difficult in the face of role confusion and low resources for social work staffing. According to Aldridge and Cautley (1975), this need is greatest importance during the early months of placement. There was a difference of experience reflected in the responses to the statement about having bad relationships with social workers. Slightly greater (11% more) disagreement compared to agreement was apparent, and subgroup analysis identified no subgroup differences. The experience of bad relationships with social workers was clearly not universal, but substantive with 42% reporting agreement to the statement.

Native children are over-represented in foster care (Children's Advocate, 1991). In our sample, they formed 65% of the children in the care of foster parents surveyed, and only 15% of the foster parents were themselves Native. There was a "moderate" level of agreement among foster parents about their knowledge of Native culture. Native foster parents reported slightly stronger knowledge about Native culture than non-Native foster parents (difference of 1.0) did.

Foster parents responded in "slight" agreement to the statement about cultural differences being relevant to raising foster children. Slight differences in responses to this statement by geographic region were apparent, with north (of Edmonton) and south (of Calgary) areas having mean responses in the "neutral" range, and Edmonton, central, and Calgary in the "slight" to "moderate" disagreement range. A minimum difference between the mean responses of 1.1 was apparent.

The need for supportive foster families was also apparent in the literature (Bauer & Heinke, 1976). The support of the families of foster parents for foster children was strongly agreed to by foster parents in the present study. Clearly, these foster parents found their families supportive of their foster children. However, the results did not suggest the absence of problems between biological and foster children. The statement about having problems between biological and foster children was disagreed with only slightly by foster parents. There was a modest difference between average ratings of foster parents with four to six current foster children (mean rating of 6.2) compared to those with three or less (mean rating of 5.2 or less). Although small, the presence of fewer difficulties between biological and foster children in homes with the greatest number of foster children could be explored in future research.

A relationship between payment adequacy and the perception of foster parents perceived status as service providers has been described (Chamberlain, et al. 1992). Foster parents were almost equally divided on the issue of adequacy of support received from social services. However, the finding that 46% of foster parents do not receive sufficient family support was significant. A modest difference (at least 1.1) in responding to this issue by those foster parents who have fostered for the shortest duration was noted. Foster parents in the first quartile of years fostering responded with an average rating in the "slight" to "moderate" disagreement range, indicating slightly higher ratings of support adequacy from social services than those who had been fostering longer. Additionally, the

oldest and youngest foster parents were more likely to report greater adequacy of family support (difference of at least 1.0) than the other foster parents.

Foster parents were divided on the issue of increased payment by social services for their role. The finding that almost half of foster parents (44%) reported that they should receive greater financial compensation was noteworthy. For this item, the highest proportion of neutral responses (19%) was apparent. Those foster parents in the second quartile of total number of foster children cared for, responded with greater mean ratings of agreement (at least 1.2) than foster parents in the other quartiles. Additionally, the foster parents in the highest quartile of years fostering responded more neutrally on average than those with fewer years fostering (difference between means of at least 1.0). Foster parents who had the most foster children and been fostering for the most years were slightly less likely to report that they should be paid more by social services.

Foster parents reported that others have a personal style that is inappropriate for being a good foster parent. Foster parents with the fewest total foster children were found to me more likely to be in "slight" agreement or "neutral" to judging others' personality as inappropriate for fostering (difference between means of at least 1.2). Those who have had the fewest foster children were slightly more likely to report less inappropriate style in other foster parents.

Almost all participants in the study reported having good parenting skills that help them to be good foster parents. These ratings did not vary according to the demographic variables used in the study.

Walter (1993) indicated that foster parents in Alberta had identified a lack of information about the children in their care as a concern. Almost two-thirds (62%) of foster parents in the present study indicated that they did not get enough case information about their foster children. Foster parents in the central region of the province, the area south of Edmonton and north of Calgary, were more likely to report that they do not get enough case information than foster parents in other areas (difference between means of at least 1.1).

Foster parents reported that generally they wanted to be involved in department decisions about their foster children. This finding is consistent with Bernd Walter's (1993) review of the child welfare system in Alberta. Among those foster parents surveyed in the present study, this preference did not vary according to the demographic variables used.

Professionalization of foster parenting is an area in the literature that is debated (Waldock, 1996). Foster parents were evenly divided on their perceptions of being treated as professionals. However, the finding that 44% felt that foster parents are not treated as professionals was notable. Foster parents in the Calgary area as well as those residing further south of Calgary were more likely to agree that foster parents were not treated like professionals than those in other areas of the province (difference between means of at least 1.2) were. Additionally, the oldest foster parents (fourth quartile) were more likely to agree that foster parents did not receive professional treatment than foster parents in the other age groupings (difference between means of at least 1.2). There were slight geographical differences and age differences in perceptions of professional treatment.

According to Walter (1993), foster parents in Alberta had expressed difficulty in dealing with biological parents of the foster children in their care. Foster parents were divided about whether they had experienced biological parent interference, with almost half (49%) reporting that they had. Foster parents who had cared for more than the average number of children (third quartile) were more likely to agree that they have had this experience than other foster parents (difference between means of 1.0). Because this slight difference was not reflected with the group of foster parents who had cared for the largest total numbers of foster children, it is unlikely that the number of foster children and biological parent interference were directly related. However, this group of foster parents had a considerably lower average number of foster children (mean = 21.2) than the highest group (mean = 134.3). They may have had relatively fewer, but more long-term placements that could involve more time for biological parent involvement, and perhaps "interference."

Foster parents were divided on the issue of experience of having their safety threatened by a foster child. In Walter's (1993) report, this was described as an issue for many Alberta foster parents. That 44% of foster parents in the present study reported concern about their family's safety was significant. There was no difference on this statement according to the demographic variables used in the study.

While the majority of foster parents reported concern about being accused of abuse, almost one-third (30%) were not concerned. Swan (1997; 1999) reported that accusations of abuse are a concern for foster parents. Foster parents with more than one current foster child were more likely to report being concerned about being accused of abuse than those with one current foster child (difference between means of at least 1.8). Additionally, the oldest foster parents (fourth quartile) were less likely to report being concerned about accusations of abuse than the other foster parents (difference between means of at least 1.4). Having one foster child at a time and greater age were associated with decreased concern about abuse allegations. A potentially confounding variable that was not included in this study was the experience of abuse allegations. This variable should be included in other research into this issue.

Foster parents indicated that their health generally did affect how they foster. These ratings did not vary according to the demographic variables used in this study. Reports of significant stresses among foster parents should be attended to (Wells & D'Angelo, 1994).

Foster parents indicated that they were not getting tired of fighting on behalf of their foster children. Again, these ratings did not vary according to the demographic variables used in this study.

Locus of Control, Stress, and Sense of Burden

On their locus of control, personal stress and sense of burden on five-point scales foster parents reported being "somewhat" in control of the behavior of their foster children, having a "moderate" level of stress, and finding fostering to be a "moderate" burden. Correlation analysis indicated that locus of control was not related to either stress level (r =

.08) or sense of burden (r = .02), however, stress level and sense of burden had a stronger relationship (r = .52). Personal stress was related very modestly to parent age (r = .25), number of years fostering (r = .25), and total number of foster children cared for (r = .22). ANOVA results for these variables showed no significant interaction effects for gender, total number of years fostering, ethnicity, or number of current foster children.

Table 5.6: Mean Differences and (P-Values)

	Locus of Control	Personal Stress	Sense of Burden
Gender	.075 (.68)	.321 (.08)	.191 (.43)
Years Fostering	-.120 (.50)	-.300 (.09)	.080 (.73)
Ethnicity	-.290 (.24)	-.427 (.09)	.133 (.68)
Current Foster Children	.142 (.44)	-.031 (.87)	.005 (.98)

Summary

One hundred foster parents from the membership list of the Alberta Foster Parent Association consented to a telephone survey asking about the needs and challenges they face as foster parents. The survey included questions about basic demographics for the foster parents and foster children as well as 18 statements derived from two concept mapping studies (Brown & Calder, 1999a; Brown & Calder, 1999b) of this population asking about needs and challenges. Responses to the statements varied only slightly if at all according to the demographic variables used in the study, and although there are some statements that indicate a split of opinion or experience among foster parents, only one statement received neutral responses above 10%.

Very few of the statements included in the study received significant amounts of neutral responses, suggesting that these are issues on which foster parents tend to agree or disagree. Several statements had high ratings of agreement. It is apparent that foster parents have families who are supportive of their foster children, that they report having good parenting skills, benefit from the advise and experience of other foster parents, want to be

involved in department decisions about their foster children and report having knowledge about Native culture. The majority of foster parents report that they know of other foster parents who do not have the appropriate knowledge or skills to be good caregivers, that their health affects how well they foster, and that they have not been given enough case information by the department about their foster children.

Foster parents reported having few problems between their biological and foster children, that cultural differences are relevant to raising foster children, and that they are not getting tired of fighting on behalf of their foster children. Almost half of the foster parents surveyed reported that their safety had been threatened by a foster child, and over two-thirds are concerned about being accused of abuse by their foster children. Almost half of foster parents reported that they do not receive enough family support from social services and the same proportion report that they should be paid more by social services. About half of the foster parents reported that the biological parents of their foster children have "interfered." Over 40% of foster parents reported having bad relationships with social workers and about half reported that foster parents are not treated like professionals.

Conclusion

In this study important features of support provision to foster parents in Alberta have been identified. The findings very clearly support the development and maintenance of relationships between foster parents that should be facilitated and supported by the department. As well, it would be an important use of resources to recruit and retain Native foster parents. Services should be available to teach skills to maintain a supportive foster family. Screening, monitoring and matching (foster parents and foster children) should not be second in importance to providing a placement. It is unethical to remove children from the parental home and provide them with care that is of lesser quality. Foster parents need to be involved in department decisions about their foster children, have a clear role in the care of their foster child and have good functional relationships with social workers. Initiative should be taken to ensure that these needs are consistently met. Foster parents need

education and support around the issues of aggressive behavior by foster children as well as abuse allegations in the interests of both foster parent and foster child safety. Also, foster parents need to have the means to take care of themselves; the education and benefits (e.g. respite) for this should be made accessible. Finally, it is indeed encouraging that foster parents are not getting tired of fighting on behalf of their foster children.

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CHAPTER 6 – SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this chapter, the study participants are briefly described and the overall results summarized. Recommendations from this research as well as limitations of the studies are described.

Study Participants

Forty-nine participants from 30 foster families were asked to describe their needs and challenges in response to the following questions: "What do you need to be a good foster parent?," and "What would make you consider stopping foster parenting?" Foster parents were selected at random from the membership list of the AFPA and contacted by telephone by the researchers. The data was subjected to a non-parametric statistical analysis to identify themes. These themes formed the basis of a survey to answer the question: "to what extent do other foster parents face the same needs and challenges?" This second survey was administered to a random sample of foster 100 parents also drawn from the membership of the Alberta Foster Parent Association. The foster parents in both random samples resided in varying regions of the province including urban, rural and reserve areas as well as in communities of varying sizes. Native and non-Native foster parents of Native and non-Native foster children who had varying levels of exceptionality, participated. The age of foster parents, the number of years fostering, the number of current foster children currently in the home, and the total number of foster children cared for varied considerably.

Summary of Results

From the qualitative studies on the needs (Brown & Calder, 1999a) and challenges (Brown & Calder, 1999b) of foster parents, a total of nine themes were apparent. Each of these themes is briefly described, related to the relevant literature and compared to the prevalence data that were obtained (Brown & Calder, 1999c).

Foster parents reported a need for good working relationships with department staff, other foster parents and helping professionals in the interest of obtaining needed goods and services for foster children in their care (Brown & Calder, 1999a). There was evidence in

the literature that good working relationships between foster parents with department staff were important to foster parents (O'Hara, 1986), and that the amount of involvement was less important than the availability and frequency of contact (Chamberlain, et al. 1992). It was also noted that mutual support from other foster parents was helpful (Hampson & Taverna, 1989: Jacobs, 1980). Ninety-three per cent of foster parents reported that they did indeed benefit from the support and advice of other foster parents, and 53% had not had a bad relationships with social workers, while 42% had (Brown & Calder, 1999c).

Foster parents reported a need for cultural sensitivity, including openness, awareness and respect for cultural differences among foster children (Brown & Calder, 1999a). Native children were over-represented in foster care (Children's Advocate, 1991). Often, Native children in foster care were placed in a non-Native foster home. In a random sample (Brown & Calder, 1999c) of foster parents, 15% were Native compared to 65% of the foster children in their care. Among Alberta foster parents (Brown & Calder, 1999c), 90% reported knowledge of Native culture, and 72% said that cultural differences were relevant to raising foster children.

Foster parents reported a need for foster parents to have harmonious and stable relationships with all immediate family members as well as necessary skills to create and maintain such an environment (Brown & Calder, 1999a). Family support has been identified as necessary to effective fostering (Bauer & Heinke, 1976), and worthy of professional support, when necessary, to cope with changes that come to the natural family when foster children are introduced (Lowe, 1990; Poland & Groze, 1993). Almost all (99%) of foster parents agreed that people in their family supported their foster children, but 33% reported problems between their biological and foster children (Brown & Calder, 1999c).

Foster parents reported a need to have adequate payment for their services as foster parents (Brown & Calder, 1999a). There is some agreement that foster parents should be provided with financial compensation for the expenses of raising a child (Banks & Jamieson, 1990). However, the experience of inadequate compensation for out-of-pocket

expenses is not uncommon (Edwards, 1980). Various methods to calculate compensation of foster parents for their time have been presented (Hazel, 1981; Peterson, 1974; Selles, 1977; Shah & Poulos, 1974). Among a sample of Alberta foster parents, 44% reported that they should be paid more, and 46% said that they did not receive enough family support from social services.

Foster parents indicated that a number of personality characteristics were favorable to being a good foster parent (Brown & Calder, 1999a). Several characteristics were described. For example, foster parents reported that kindness, consideration, insight, fairness, commitment, and persistence were necessary to be a good foster parent. The characteristics appeared to have considerable face validity, but may not necessarily be specific to being a good foster parent, but perhaps a good caregiver in general. According to Stratix (1991) most foster parents had parenting experience before becoming foster parents. In a sample of Alberta foster parents, the average age was 47 years, the oldest foster parent was 71 and the youngest was 28 (Brown & Calder, 1999c). These foster parents had been fostering for about nine years, with a range from less than one, to 45. They reported having good parenting skills that helped them to be good foster parents, but 74% reported that they believed some foster parents did not have the right personality.

Foster parents reported that working with the department of Child Welfare and its staff was one challenge that could be faced (Brown & Calder, 1999b). Consistent, knowledgeable, and accessible department staff have been identified as helpful characteristics by foster parents (Aldridge & Cautley, 1975; O'Hara, 1986). It is also important to match foster parents and foster children on the basis of foster parent skills and foster child needs (Simms, 1991). Matching implies that sufficient information about the child is collected and shared with foster parents so that they can make an informed decision about the appropriateness of their home as a placement (Doeslling & Johnson, 1990). Sixty-two per cent of foster parents reported that they had not been given enough case

information, and 90% wanted to be involved in department decisions about their foster children (Brown & Calder, 1999c).

Foster parents indicated that another challenge to foster parenting was being led to believe that their work had low value in the perception of others (Brown & Calder, 1999b). Some foster parents experience low pay and strained relationships with department staff which have been found to decrease work satisfaction by foster parents (Martin,Altemeier, Hickson, Davis, & Glascoe, 1992). Some foster parents wish to be treated as quasi- or para-professionals (Waldock, 1996). Role confusion and stress around dealing with the biological families of foster children has been reported (Hampson, 1985). According to a sample of Alberta foster parents, 51% reported that they were not treated like professionals, and 49% indicated that biological parents had been interfering.

Foster parents described threats to family and personal safety, both physical/emotional and legal, as a challenge to fostering (Brown & Calder, 1999b). Threats to family safety have been reported, and are particularly stressful when foster parents are unprepared for behaviors that a foster child may exhibit. Clearly it is very important to collect case information and inform foster parents about behaviors a child may exhibit and determine the degree to which those parents feel competent to manage them (Cooper, Peterson, & Meier, 1987). Forty-four per cent of foster parents reported that the safety of their family has been threatened by a foster child (Brown & Calder, 1999c). Research is accumulating around the issue of allegations of maltreatment by foster children against foster parents (Hicks & Nixon, 1991; Morisette, 1993). The prevalence of this concern is significant. Among a sample of Alberta foster parents, 68% were concerned about being accused of abuse (Brown & Calder, 1999c).

Foster parents identified personal/familial and stress-related challenges that could cause thoughts of quitting foster parenting (Brown & Calder, 1999b). Family difficulties have been reported causes of placement breakdown (Bauer & Heinke, 1976; Poland & Groze, 1993). Personal problems could contribute to a high stress level that may contribute

to a decision to quit fostering. In a sample of Alberta foster parents, 75% reported that their health affects how well they foster, and that 64% reported that they were not getting tired of fighting on behalf of their foster children (Brown & Calder, 1999c).

The results of the thematic analysis and prevalence data lend credibility to the existing literature on the needs and challenges of foster parents. The themes describe relevant issues, and the prevalence data, their importance. Clearly, there is significant research evidence to describe what foster parents need, and what would make them consider quitting. There are also significant difficulties with the retention of foster parents, foster care drift (Walter, 1993) and recently resurfaced concerns about the safety of children in the care of the Child Welfare system (Liberals challenge figures, 1998). It is puzzling why many of the foster parent needs and challenges identified in this study and the existing literature have not, according to the government's previous Children's Advocate (Walter, 1993), been addressed, given what we know about their relevance.

Recommendations

Peer support initiatives for foster parents should be funded by the department. The development and maintenance of supportive relationships between foster parents with varying degrees of experience is important. While this can be done formally or informally, its prominence as a support feature for foster parents suggests that it is important that it receive departmental funding and staff support.

The department should make specific effort to recruit and retain Native foster parents, and make cultural sensitivity training mandatory for foster parents. The majority of foster parents believe that cultural differences are relevant to fostering and most report knowledge of Native culture, often gained through courses and attendance at Aboriginal cultural events with their foster children. There is a high proportion of Native children in their care (65%), and an apparently greater knowledge by Native foster parents about Native culture found in this study. It would be an important use of resources to recruit and retain Native foster parents. As well, given the awareness of foster parents about its

importance, continued education or experience with cross-cultural activities, particularly regarding Native culture, would be very important for the department to support.

Professional counselling services should be funded by the department. Apparent strengths emerged in the areas of parenting skill, family support, and little conflict between biological and foster children among foster parents. These qualities may have been highly developed by the foster parents themselves through trial and error, education, or with the help of advice or direction from other foster parents. The existence of such apparent strengths *should not* be assumed to exist independently of foster parent support and training and should be attended to in support services and educational programming for general parenting skills, family communication and problem-solving.

Screening (foster parent applicants), monitoring (foster parents) and matching (foster parents and foster children) should not be second in importance to providing a placement. It is concerning that foster parents see other foster parents who they judge not have the appropriate attitude or skills to be effective caregivers. The high need for spaces combined with the high demands of the social workers that are to be monitoring foster homes could reasonably allow inappropriate care to occur. Reports in the recent news suggest that foster parents are not a homogeneous group when it comes to being appropriate caregivers (Lennys go free as third trial nixed, 1988; Liberals challenge figures on child deaths, 1998). The importance of screening and monitoring should be highlighted so that tragedies involving children in care are decreased toward a goal of eradication. After all, we are supposed to be providing services for children in need of protection. The placements offered should be at the very least, safe.

Foster parents should be provided with as much case information as is relevant to the provision of care for the child. The majority of foster parents reported that that they do not get enough case information about their foster children. Some foster parents report that they know that the department does not have any more information that they are given, while others report that they believe that they were misled into taking children

who they otherwise may not have, given their history. The former is an instance of neglect, given that an assessment should be completed *before* the case plan (which includes the placement selection) for each child in care. Deception is completely inexcusable given what we know about the importance of a match between caregiver knowledge/skills and child needs (Gallaway, Nutter, & Hudson, 1995). Such placements are destined to fail. It would appear that in some cases the need for a quick child placement inappropriately outweighs the need for an appropriate assessment and matching the needs of the child to the preferences and abilities of the caregiver.

Foster parents should be involved in department decisions about their foster children. Foster parents report that they want to be involved in department decisions about their foster children, and several said that they were already. This need is consistent with making foster parents part of the professional team who together make decisions in the interest of providing the best possible care for children. However, only half of foster parents feel that they and their colleagues are treated as professionals. As front line service providers who invariably have more contact and time to observe the children in their care than other department staff, the participation and input of foster parents should be sought by the social worker.

Efforts should be made for foster parents and social workers to develop good working relationships. Close to half of foster parents' report having bad relationships with social workers. This is not a strong endorsement for good relations between foster parents and the department, and implies that more could be done by Child Welfare to promote good working relationships with the foster parents who provide a substantive portion of their essential front line services.

Foster parents should be provided with a clear role description that is specified in the service plan. Almost half of foster parents report experiencing "interference" by the biological parents of children in their care. This experience speaks to the issue of role clarity in fostering. The roles and rights of each party (social worker,

caseworker, foster parent, foster child, and biological parents) need to be clearly defined *before* the placement begins so that the frequency of perceived or inappropriate "interference" is decreased. The high prevalence of this experience among foster parents implies that this is not happening. The roles of the involved parties should be carefully delineated in the case plan, explained verbally, and perhaps even renegotiated, if appropriate, after a specified length of time.

Specific training modules on the topic of family violence including legal aspects should be available to foster parents. The majority of foster parents are concerned about being accused of abuse. Accusations have come to be the reality of fostering; that is, over time there is a good chance that a foster parent will be accused of inappropriate conduct. Allegations are not, and should not be taken as a verdict of guilt. Nor should they be dismissed without an appropriate investigation. This concern could be addressed through increased foster parent education regarding the forms of abuse, the cycle of abuse, and ways to recognize their own propensity to commit abuse. Additional information on the reporting and investigation process, strategies that may reduce the likelihood of an allegation, and tips on ways (e.g. record keeping) to protect oneself in case of an allegation may also be helpful. Its importance to foster parents suggests that attention to this issue would be very timely and useful to many.

Specialized professional support for foster parents of children with a history of dangerous aggressive behavior should be available. The high prevalence of concern for their family's safety by foster parents due to a foster child needs to be attended to. Given its prevalence, this issue should be comprehensively addressed in orientation training as well as during ongoing educational programming for foster parents. Social workers who have reason to suspect that a child is a danger to her/himself or others have an ethical obligation to intervene. Treatment should be provided immediately and risk assessment information should be disclosed to foster parents in the interests of child and family safety.

Foster parents need to have the means to take care of themselves; the education and benefits (e.g. respite) for this should be made accessible. Foster parents report that their health affects how they foster. Healthy foster parents may be more likely to provide better care to their foster children. The importance of support and education on self-care strategies could be beneficial in this regard. Current coursework with its emphasis on caring for different populations of children may be missing important curricula related to stress management.

Study Limitations

Foster parents who are members of the Alberta Foster Parent Association were surveyed about their needs and challenges. Membership in the AFPA is voluntary and includes approximately 15-20% of the foster parents in the province. We could find no information about whether or how foster parent members differ from non-members of the AFPA, and cannot generalize the findings to all foster parents in the province. While the sample appeared to have adequate geographical, ethnocultural, and experience representation of the membership, the numbers were not sufficient to arrive at a judgement about the presence or absence of subgroup differences. Preliminary analysis suggested that there was little systematic variation in the survey responses from foster parents living in different regions of the province, urban versus rural residence, Native versus non-native foster parents, or different amounts of foster parenting experience. Data from a larger sample may be valuable for the detection of service needs for foster parents in different regions depending on the demographic group of foster parents residing there. Native foster parents and Native foster children are respectively under and over-represented in the system. The needs of Native parents and foster parents of Native foster children were not adequately described in these studies, but could be identified with a larger sample. Future research could include a larger sample of foster parents.

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